PLAYSTATION 4: INSIDE ALL THE LATEST GAMES

gamesTM

www.gamestm.co.uk

PS4 | Wii U | Xbox 360 | PS3 | Wii | PC | PS Vita | 3DS | iPhone | Arcade | Retro

World Exclusive

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV BLACK FLAG

- New combat system detailed
- Historical setting exposed
- Naval warfare evolution

SECRETS REVEALED

WATCH DOGS

Ubisoft talks exclusively about its stunning open-world thriller



FIRST LOOK

THE WITCHER 3 WILD HUNT

The first RPG of the next generation

HIGHLIGHTS

■ SAINTS ROW IV ■ KILLZONE: MERCENARY ■ METRO: LAST LIGHT
■ BIOSHOCK INFINITE ■ PIKMIN 3 ■ SIMCITY ■ ANIMAL CROSSING
■ MARIO & LUIGI: DREAM TEAM ■ GEARS OF WAR: JUDGMENT



DigitalEdition
GreatDigitalMags.com
ISSUE 134

A NEW VISION FROM THE PRODUCERS OF THE ORIGINAL CLASSIC

THE MOST
TERRIFYING
FILM YOU
WILL EVER
EXPERIENCE.

EVIL DEAD

/EvilDeadUK

IN CINEMAS
APRIL 19

CERT TBC
GHOST HOUSE
STUDIOCANAL

Motion Picture Artwork © 2012 Columbia TriStar Marketing Group, Inc. All Rights Reserved

After all the excitement of the PlayStation 4 launch and the incessant rumour mill surrounding the new Xbox – this issue is all about the games.

We take to the high seas with *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, talking exclusively to Ubisoft's Montreal studio about the new historical setting it has chosen, the redesign of the combat system and evolution of the naval warfare. While with Ubisoft we also got them to open up with secrets for the PlayStation 4 launch show-stopper *Watch Dogs* – a game that is set to redefine the open-world genre.

Pirates and assassinations not gritty enough for you? Then try Sony's *The Last Of Us* – a mix of zombies, death and the apocalypse. Or the monster hunting on offer in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* – the first RPG of the next generation.

Montreal is truly a centre of excellence in videogame production as we returned again, this time to the Eidos Montreal studios for the reveal of the *Thief* sequel being published by Square Enix.

2013 is shaping up to be a staggering year for videogames, and we have only just started to scratch the surface.

Nick Roberts

Nick Roberts
EDITOR IN CHIEF




YOU FOUND THE BAG
WITH FIVE PEANUTS


4
3

Contents



www.gamestm.co.uk 134 | 13

facebook.com/gamesTM @gamesTMmag gplus.to/gamesTMmagazine

Visit the games™ online shop at imagineshop.co.uk for back issues, books and merchandise


56 Thief

DISCUSS


42 Saints Row IV

RETRO

PREVIEWS


48 Pikmin 3

REVIEWS


88 BioShock Infinite

FEATURES

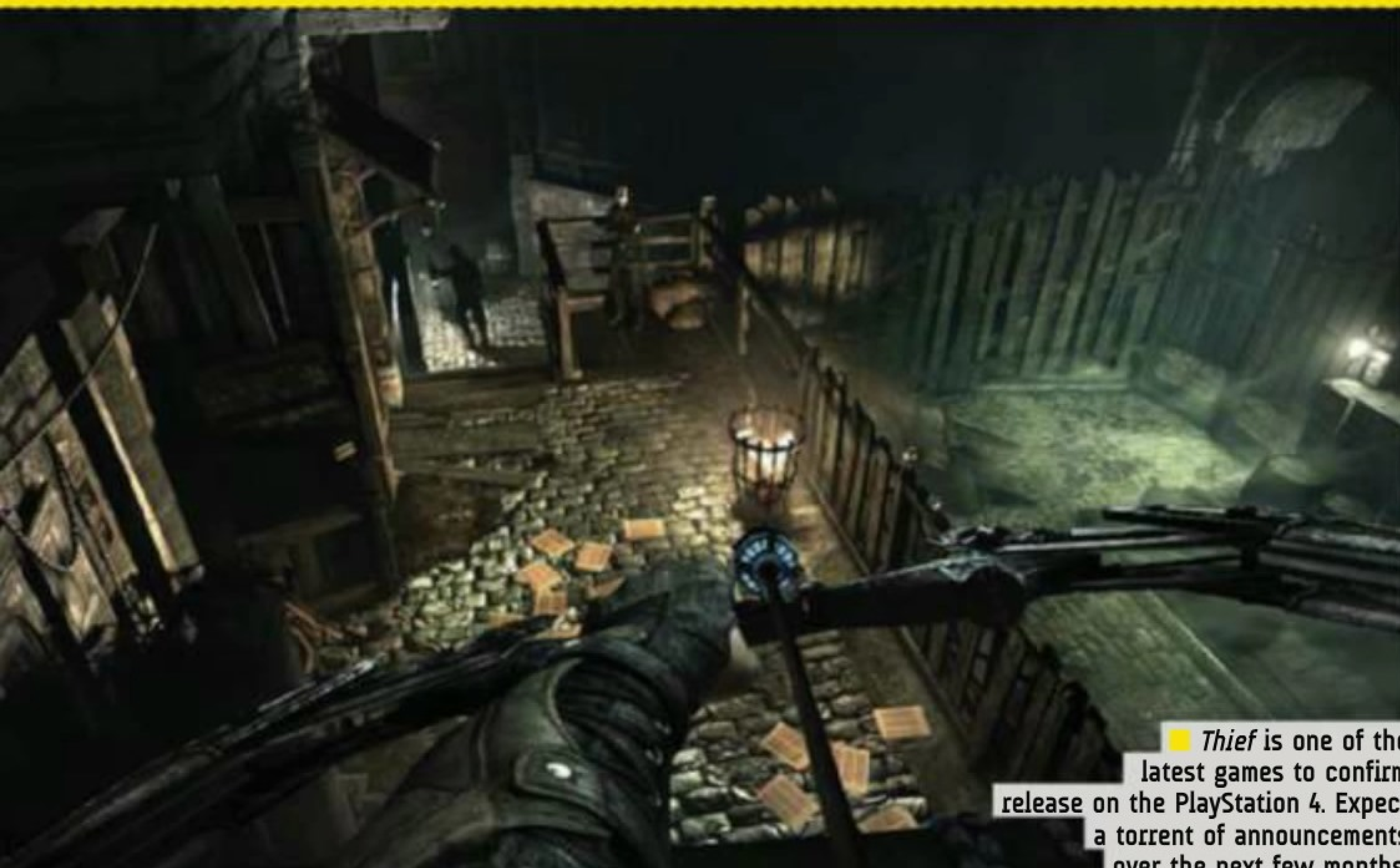

70 The Last Of Us

FAVOURITES

> Have your say on anything videogame related at **www.gamestm.co.uk/forum** and you could feature in **games™**



24 Feature
Assassins Creed IV:
Black Flag
The most stunning revision of the Assassin's Creed formula to date, game director Ashraf Ismail talks exclusively to games™ about the open-world epic.
SUBSCRIBE NOW
and save 30%
Turn to page 86



Thief is one of the latest games to confirm release on the PlayStation 4. Expect a torrent of announcements over the next few months.







Ubisoft is still remaining tight-lipped about *Watch Dogs*, but it's easily one of the most eagerly anticipated releases on the new console.





Killzone: Shadow Fall was one of the most impressive displays of the hardware's capabilities, but the lack of new IP was criticised by some in the industry.

DATA STREAM → ZYNGA ISN'T DEAD; THE STUDIO HAS ANNOUNCED A FOLLOW-UP TO DRAW SOMETHING

Contents

Your guide to the essential stories

For daily news updates and exclusive interviews

facebook.com/gamesTM

@gamesTMmag

gplus.to/gamesTMmagazine



(THE FOURTH DIMENSION)

The Truth About PlayStation 4

No sooner had Sony announced its latest hardware that analysts, gamers and hardware aficionados began to pore over the minutiae of the PlayStation 4. Delving into the critical reaction, **games™** investigates the technology destined to shape the next era in gaming

"Sony believes the future will be like the past and has built the game console to prove it," lamented Forrester analyst James McQuivey shortly after the lights dimmed on the PlayStation Meeting back in February. His words were pointed but his argument rational: Sony's approach to the PlayStation 4 lacks the foresight to adequately compete with the exponentially mushrooming demand for digital and mobile experiences.

There's no denying that digital is a high priority, as a quaint graphic suggested remote play – enabling players to continue playing their PlayStation 4 games on the move – could potentially stretch beyond the PlayStation Vita (which itself currently supports very limited remote play with the PS3) and support mobile phone and tablet devices facilitated through an app. It's a step in the right direction, but to date such technology has either limited or compromised the user experience – only a select number of products remain compatible, and those that are experience a noticeable performance drop.

It seems that while much was said at the PlayStation Meeting held on 20 February beyond the explosions and parade of impressive visual tricks that ran the industry dry of superlatives, the nebulousness regarding key features and Sony's business strategy has left many sceptical.

Below Sony hasn't spoken a great deal about the PlayStation 4 since the announcement in February. We expect that the company will remain quiet until E3 in June, where the look of the console and further details about its hardware will be revealed.

> "Price will be very important. Last cycle Sony really hurt itself… even though it had the most powerful system consumers weren't interested at that price point"
>
> Eric Handler, BMKM Partners

There was also the issue of IP. Sony has been celebrated in the past for being at the forefront of innovation; the PlayStation 3 introduced such popular and profitable franchises such as *LittleBigPlanet*, *Uncharted* and *Heavy Rain*, yet the public display was lacking in bespoke originality.

"As a lover of new IP I'm a bit bummed by the lack of it from the PS4 news," bemoaned Cliff Bleszinski on Twitter following the initial announcement. The *Gears Of War* creator was referring specifically to his anticipation of a new IP from Guerrilla Games (rather than another *Killzone*), but the presentation was lacking in anything that could pass off as revolutionary. *DriveClub*, *Killzone: Shadow Fall*, *Knack* and *inFamous: Second Son* exploded onto the radar in eye-watering, bombastic fashion, but it felt to many far too reminiscent of current-gen trends. Again, Sony only gave a hint as to its strategy to push the industry forwards in any meaningful capacity; Quantic Dream and Media Molecule's fantastical technological demonstrations dazzled but did little to fill in the blanks.

BUT PERHAPS THE most contentious issue was the way cloud technology and social networking would interact. Last year Sony acquired Gaikai – the cloud-based gaming platform spearheaded by Dave Perry. Perry has since remained quiet as to how his business will develop under the acquisition by Sony, but now more information has come to light that has aligned with Perry's previous realistic hopes for the potential of the streaming technology. The most obvious (read: expected) feature was access to back catalogue titles through the PlayStation 4, but the inclusion of a 'Share' button might be the most impressive aspect of Sony's plan for PlayStation 4. "I suspect that the importance of this feature will be largely lost on many within the industry itself," claimed gamesindustry.biz's Rob Fahey. "The internet's 'video natives' are mostly in their teens and early twenties – but be absolutely assured that video streaming, 'Let's Play' video series and clips of popular games are already a huge deal for a vast swathe of the audience for games. In years to come, I suspect that PS4's integration of the tech will probably feel absolutely essential, rather than being a speculative side-feature, and that already

2013'S PC AND INDIE GAME EXPO REZZED HAS BEEN DATED FOR 22 AND 23 JUNE IN BIRMINGHAM





(PLAYSTATION 4'S FIRST INDIE SENSATION)

Uncovered from gamesTM 114, we talk to Jonathan Blow about his timed PlayStation 4 exclusive The Witness



Below While the initial release date was a tentative 2012, it looks like we'll finally see *The Witness* by the end of the year.

Talking to Jonathan Blow about *The Witness* towards the end of 2011, there was never any question that the self-funded follow-up to *Braid* was an ambitious endeavour. "This is a much bigger game than *Braid*," says Blow. "Gameplay-wise, it's at least twice as long. And it's got way more individual ideas in it. It's clearly a very different game. I don't think it's a game for everybody. Certainly it is not designed based on what will sell to the broadest spectrum of gamers. For the most part, [though], people really like it. And it's actually a higher percentage than I expected. I would have thought maybe half the people who played this game are going to be kind of confused about why they're doing all these puzzles and stuff. But the percentage of people who get involved is way higher than that. So I think that bodes well for the public."

In *The Witness*, players explore a whimsical island, solving puzzles printed on various panels across the world to further unlock the isle's many secrets. "Every single panel in the whole game, you can say a little sentence about what it's about," says Blow. "And there's about 300 of those. So it's kind of a rich game design. In *Braid*, there were maybe 80 or 85 puzzles. So this is bigger, it's longer, and because it's 3D, it's much more involved. So the budget is already ten times the budget of *Braid*; it's ridiculous.

"[In] a lot of these puzzle-orientated games, there's the idea of what the game designer *thinks* is the gameplay in an adventure game, which is 'Players are going to think about this puzzle and figure it out'," continues Blow. "But the actual gameplay that people engage in does not resemble that at all; it resembles 'Let me try using all these objects with all these other objects, because I don't know what's going to happen. Let me walk through every room and click on everything because I don't know what to do.' And that's not very fun, I don't think. And not only is it not fun, it's not interesting, and it's clumsy. So I wanted to make something that, after you get out of that initial tutorial area which shows you all the stuff, then you kind of know what the deal is."

As a timed exclusive for the PS4, Jonathan Blow's *The Witness* demonstrates Sony's continued support of indie development as it heads into a new era of hardware. As another interesting, subversive and confounding challenge in the marketplace, *The Witness* will no doubt define what we can expect from some of the most talented independent creatives working on Sony's new console.

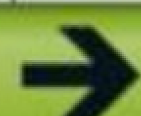


Below Speaking to Blow, it's clear that the island would be the star of the game, with each piece of the puzzle unwrapping new clues as to its purpose.

derided 'Share' button on the controller will get far more of a workout than the social-network-phobic types decrying it on Twitter (oh, the irony!) could ever imagine."

Indeed, even developers are already anticipating the advantages of the PlayStation 4's social functions. "I think the streaming element that Sony talked about in its press conference of being able to stream your content out was made for the fighting game community," Hector Sanchez, producer on *Injustice: Gods Among Us* told **games**™. "You can go on Twitch or any of streaming channels and you'll see people playing fighting games all the time. To see that on your console without having to invest in the software or hardware to do it is going to explode the fighting game market because people are going to see different tactics. They'll say 'Hey, I never really played with Joker until I saw this dude in Bristol whooping ass with Joker, so I wanted to start playing as him and learning him as well.'

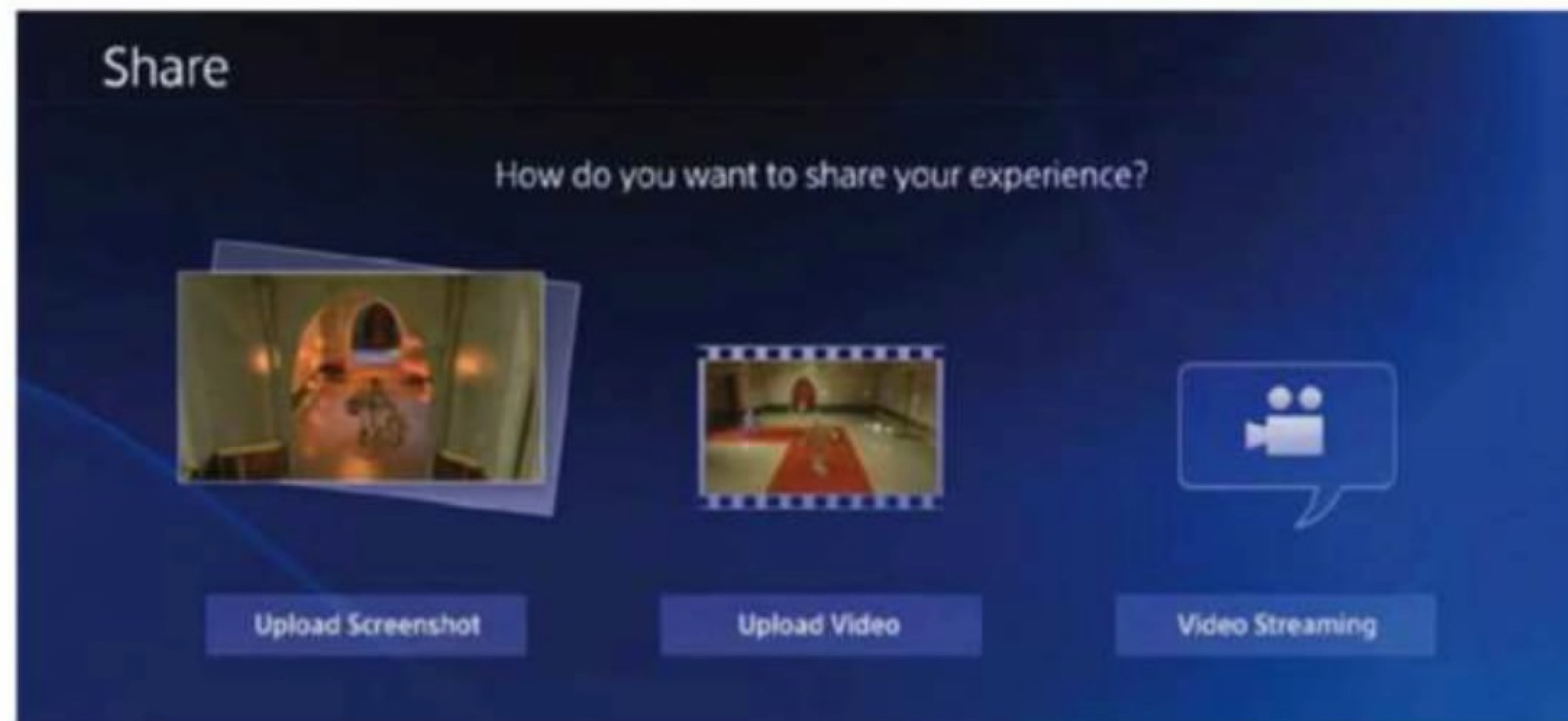
"I THINK THAT that's the biggest incentive to look forward to as far as next-gen fighting games go," he continues. "The social aspect of being able to drop into anyone's games. Seeing some kid across the world who's kicking ass and you're like 'I want to beat that kid. He thinks he's the best but I'm the best, so I'm going to watch him and see what his style is and develop a strategy to beat him.' I think that's the coolest part of next-gen that I've seen so far. Obviously not all of the capabilities have been communicated yet but as far as the key points that were part of that specific press conference, to me, that's the one that affects the fighting games community the best."



ARCADE ENTHUSIAST DEFEATS MISSILE COMMAND RECORD SET IN 1982 WITH A SCORE OF 80.5 MILLION



Below The now notorious 'Share' button on the new DualShock 4 controller has been a divisive inclusion, with some corners of the industry dismissing the functionality as arbitrary and frivolous.



Sony, then, is embracing the emerging trends in the marketplace, further nurturing the tastes of a new generation as the company has done so to some success in previous hardware iterations. But social interactivity isn't isolated in its current embryonic uprising and the likes of free-to-play and episodic business platforms were mentioned as integral pillars of Sony's strategy moving forward, if not detailed outright how they would factor in. We can assume that this is part of Sony's larger goal of further opening up the platform to smaller developers, as self-publishing was duly addressed. Sony has been commended in the past for its treatment of indie developers and its approach to self-publishing compared to its console rivals. Further pursuing this will only strengthen Sony's position in the forthcoming years.

Below While mobile remote play has been touted as a key feature of the PlayStation 4, currently its functionality on the PlayStation 3 is limited and compromises the quality of the gaming experience.

Again, a lot at this current juncture is left to guesswork (intentionally, we might add), but there are both signs that Sony has learnt from the mistakes of its past and moving forward with an admirable self-assurance with where it needs to direct the business. It at least realised that it needed to position itself competitively on the marketplace, which included trumping Microsoft when it came to announcing the console first. "I think Sony has created some excitement in that it beat Microsoft to the market with news about a new console for this holiday season," agrees analyst Eric Handler, managing director of the media & entertainment branch of MKM Partners. However, he also admits that the announcement left some gamers wanting: "The reaction has been somewhat mixed and we are still lacking a lot of key information."

"As a lover of new IP I'm a bit bummed by the lack of it from the PS4 news"
Cliff Bleszinski, Gears Of War creator

"PRICE WILL BE very important," he continues. Last cycle Sony really hurt itself with its $599 US launch price. Even though it had the most powerful system consumers weren't interested at that price point, especially when considering the system lacked sufficient exclusive titles to win back market share from Microsoft," he concludes.

The price. Alongside the non-appearance of the actual console shell, the lack of confirmation of the price has been the cause of some concern. Will Sony decide to charge a similar fee to the PlayStation 3, a system that, visually at least, had a more dramatic leap in quality compared to its predecessor? Given the resurgence of PC gaming and murmurings of Valve entering the hardware space, such an expense may place Sony out of the competition.

Yet, while many have criticised Sony's announcement of the PlayStation 4 for lacking crucial information in a number of areas, there's no doubt that it was a bold, successful beginning for Sony's new console. All eyes will be on the company in the coming months to see whether it can maintain the momentum and provide the right answers. 



(THE TROUBLE WITH NEXTBOX)

After several leaks, troubling rumours emerge from Camp Xbox

WHILE WE HAVE no idea what the next console from Microsoft is or when it is likely to release (although an announcement is tipped for late April/early May), there has been an incredible surge in leaks from various media outlets reporting on several key features that the new Xbox is set to include. One feature that has caused the most concern is that the new system will install games directly to its hard drive, and will not support play from its optical disc. The ramifications of such a feature would have a clear negative impact in the used games marketplace, resembling the current rights-management strategies used by PC game publishers that have hardly gone down swimmingly with gamers. Further adding to the worrying notes, the console codenamed Durango is also reported to be always online and require Kinect to be connected to operate. While the validity of these features remains to be seen, it does outline a bold, albeit slightly alienating, strategy from Microsoft's next phase in the console marketplace.

AN HD REMAKE OF ALL THREE TIMESPLITTERS GAMES IS CURRENTLY IN THE WORKS 

Tech Comparison: PlayStation 4 vs PlayStation 3

AS WE REACH the end of another hardware cycle, it's no surprise that the announcement of the PlayStation 4 arrives seven years after the 2006 release of its predecessor, the PlayStation 3. Back in 2005, when the PS3 was unveiled, it was an eagerly anticipated next step in the industry, redefining home consoles as multimedia hubs and pushing gaming into high definition.

Hardware-wise, the PlayStation 4 eclipses its predecessor by quite a considerable margin, even if many of the specifics won't cause much concern for PC enthusiasts. The PS4's GPU significantly outguns the proprietary PS3 RSX design and the system boasts a heady eight gigabytes of GDDR5 Ram (that's 16 times the raw memory than the PS3) and a hefty graphics card that can push 1.84 T-FLOPS. That's all part of an eight-core 64-bit processor that will contribute to alleviating optimisation issues, with a low-powered chip that'll be responsible for helping to process background tasks. All in all, what Sony has on its hands is a machine that significantly trumps anything currently on the console market. Putting the PlayStation 3 and PlayStation 4 side-by-side, it's clear that we've come a long way in seven years.

PLAYSTATION 4	VS	PLAYSTATION 3
TBA	DIMENSIONS	290mm (w) x 60mm (h) x 230mm (d)
TBA	WEIGHT	2.1kg
CPU: Eight-core X86 AMD Jaguar GPU:1.84 T-FLOPS, AMD Radeon Graphics Core Next Engine	PROCESSOR	CPU: 3.2 GHz Cell Broadband Engine GPU: RSX "Reality Synthesizer" @ 550MHz, 1.8 T-FLOPS floating point performance
8GB GDDR5 RAM	MEMORY	256MB XDR Main RAM 256MB GDDR3 VRAM
Built-in	HARD DISK DRIVE	Built-in
HDMI, Analog-AV out, Digital Output (Optical)	AV OUTPUT	HDMI, Analog-AV out, Digital Output (Optical)
Super Speed USB (USB 3.0) X 3, AUX	I/O OUTPUT	Hi-Speed USB (USB 2.0) X 2
Ethernet (10BASE-T,100BASE-TX, 1000BASE-T), Bluetooth 2.1 (EDR), IEEE 802.11 b/g/n Wi-Fi	COMMUNICATION	Ethernet (10BASE-T, 100BASE-TX, 1000BASE-T), Bluetooth 2.0 (EDR), IEEE 802.11 b/g Wi-Fi
1000amAh DualShock 4 (210g, six-axis motion sensing, 2 Point Touch Pad)	CONTROLLER	610amAh DualShock 3 (192g, six-axis motion sensing)
1280×800 @ 60Hz, 640×400 @ 120Hz, 320×192 @ 240Hz	CAMERA	640X480 @ 60Hz, 320×240 @ 120Hz
TBA	PRICE	$250+ (With multiple bundles)
Holiday 2013	AVAILABILITY	Now



UBISOFT HAS CONFIRMED THAT BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2 IS STILL ALIVE, DESPITE LENGTHY SILENCE

UPDATE: NEW PLAYSTATION 4 GAMES ANNOUNCED

→ Taking a look at the latest PlayStation 4 titles announced after the console unveiling



BATTLEFIELD 4

Developer: **DICE** Release: **November 2013**

■ IT'S UNSURPRISING THAT EA would bring out the big guns when it came to the launch of next-generation consoles, and you don't get much bigger than *Battlefield*. The shooter will be appearing on the PlayStation 3 at the end of the year (expected at launch), with a bigger focus on environmental gameplay, mixing up the setting from the usual dustbowls and including naval warfare in the mix. You can expect Activision to be whirling the *COD* machine into action in the coming weeks.

SNIPER ELITE III

Developer: **Rebellion** Release: **2014**

■ THERE AREN'T A lot of shooters out there that capture the thrill of sniping as succinctly as the *Sniper Elite* franchise. Developer Rebellion will be returning to the series, bringing the unique blend of stealth and tactics to the next generation of consoles. We can only imagine the excessive gore that it's preparing to shower upon us with enhancements to the X-Ray Kill Cam when the game arrives at some point in 2014.



QUANTIC DREAM'S UNTITLED PROJECT

Developer: **Quantic Dream** Release: **TBA**

■ WHILE THE STUDIO continues to polish *Beyond: Two Souls* ahead of its release later this year on PS3, the studio has confirmed that it has begun work on a new title for PS4. "For us, a new console is another reason to try and innovate," Quantic Dream's Guillaume de Fondaumière told Eurogamer. "Whatever we're working on on PS4 is not going to resemble what we're doing on PS3."





UNNAMED JUST ADD WATER PROJECT

Developer: **Just Add Water** Release: **TBA**

■ STEWARD GILRAY, ONE of the creative minds behind the delightfully bizarre *Oddworld* series has announced that his new studio Just Add Water will develop a game for the PlayStation 4. The announcement came just after the Sony conference, made backstage after all the fireworks of Sony's main presentation had concluded. We're not expecting the return of Abe, but we're sure it'll be something that suitably balances the whimsical with the utterly bonkers.

CARMAGEDDON: REINCARNATION

Developer: **Stainless Games** Release: **2013**

■ THE SUCCESSFUL KICKSTARTER campaign for a PC, Mac and Linux reboot of the *Carmageddon* franchise has now evolved into a PlayStation 4 game. Thanks to a privately raised $3.5 million – which is still rather modest in today's industry – the studio was able to bring *Carmageddon: Reincarnation* to the next generation, even suggesting that it'll switch from a digital-only release to a full-on boxed product at retail. It also added that the game would see release on Microsoft's upcoming console.

UNTITLED YAGER GAME

Developer: **Yager** Release: **TBA**

■ THE GERMAN STUDIO behind last year's narrative-driven shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* has announced that it has licensed Epic's sparkling new Unreal Engine 4 for a new project that the team is working on for PlayStation 4. Given the positive critical and commercial reaction to the cerebral shooter *Spec Ops*, it's very possible that we could be looking at a sequel headed for Sony's new console, which would arrive at the end of 2014.



→ LOST AMONG PS4 EXCITEMENT, WATCH DOGS WILL ALSO BE COMING TO WII U



> “Any game you can imagine is out there somewhere...”
> Will Wright, industry legend

1989
SimCity

1987
Studio: Maxis

1984
Raid On Bungeling Bay – The first videogame designed by Will Wright. The development process of urban planning and construction inspired Wright to create *SimCity*.

THE CAREER OF WILL WRIGHT: A LIFE IN SIMULATION



(THE WRIGHT STUFF)

Will Wright: Building A Career

→ The man behind the original SimCity and one of the founding fathers of the simulation genre discusses his fortunes, the SimCity reboot and launching his new studio, Syntertainment

You've not spoken a great deal about your new studio, Syntertainment. Is the studio just starting to come together?
Yeah, because we haven't really talked about it much at all. We just formed it a few months ago and we're in stealth mode right now. We can't really talk about it too much, you know – we're still forming the company and hiring people – but we're basically a game company and we're going to be focusing on very personalised games.

Personal games are obviously something you know a great deal about…
Well, these are games that are centred around your life and they'll be things that are based in reality, as opposed to some kind of fantasy world. There are game concepts that we're developing in this company – again, personalised things. It'll probably be more on the social/mobile side, but we're still in a brainstorming period, kind of zoning in on specific designs, but we're not really at that level of specificity yet.

Are you still an active part of Stupid Fun Club?
Well this is kind of a spin-off of Stupid Fun Club, and we've got another spin-off that is kind of a joint venture with Warner Digital called Media Graph. And there's another: our toy guys have gone off to start a toy company called Robot Lemons. So in some sense the Stupid Fun Club is split up into three separate companies now.

Can you talk about some of the projects and creative avenues you explored at Stupid Fun Club?
We did a lot of different stuff: we did some television stuff, some toy stuff, some stuff just dealing with the web. And some of the stuff just morphed into what we're doing now.



→ RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT CO-FOUNDER JASON WEST HAS DEPARTED DUE TO FAMILY ISSUES

1990 SimEarth

1991 SimAnt

1992 SimLife

1993 SimCity

1993 SimFarm

1996 SimCopter

2000 The Sims



Above Unsurprisingly, Wright's fascination for ants didn't translate into commercial success with *SimAnt*.

We did a TV show – it was kind of like an interactive show – and we did an ant farm (because I'm into ants)… it was all over the map.

They say hindsight is 20/20, so looking back at a lot of your classic games like *SimCity* and *The Sims*, what are your thoughts on them now so much time has passed?

Well, I think in some sense they started a new genre. They were also, I think, some of the earlier games that were leaning more to a mainstream audience. They were interesting people that were not necessarily into dragons or history or sports, and I think that is becoming more and more mainstream, kind of what you might call 'casual' gamers. And so they were games that were more about reality than fantasy.

Was that always your intended market?

Well, I think so. Kind of indirectly. It was more that I was interested in these subjects; I was interested in the way games intersected reality. I enjoyed playing these other games a lot, and I just felt that there wasn't enough exploration of games that were really kind of getting people to think about the world around them. So in the back of my mind my assumption was that this would appeal to a wider range of people.

You wouldn't change anything in retrospect?

No. Nothing at all, actually. I think even the things that I did that were basically failures, I learned a lot from, so it got me to where I am.

And by failures you're referring to games that underperformed commercially, such as *SimAnt*?

Actually *SimEarth*, more so. *SimAnt* to some degree, but *SimEarth* ended up having a totally different demographic than I was expecting. Yeah, it was very popular among 12-year-olds, but I thought it would be hitting an older audience. *SimEarth* ended up turning out more like a simulation just for me, you know – I enjoyed the simulation but it wasn't much of a game.

What do you think lies behind the success of your most established simulation brands, *SimCity* and *The Sims*?

I think a lot of those games invited the player in to put a lot of themselves into the game, so when people would play *SimCity* or even *The Sims*, a lot of their assumptions about the way the world works was also invited in. What do you think makes a good city? Is it less crime, less traffic or less pollution? Or for *The Sims*, what makes you happy? And so the game wasn't giving you an explicit goal. *SimCity* wasn't saying you had to make a big city or you had to make a happy city; the first thing the player had to do was sit down and think in their head, 'Okay, to me, what kind of city would I want to live in?' or in *The Sims*,



Below Will Wright's *SimCity* popularised the simulation genre, which today enjoys massive commercial success on multiple platforms.

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV, THIEF AND BATTLEFIELD 4 INFORMATION LEAKED AHEAD OF REVEAL

Will Wright's HiveMind

■ WHEN GAMES™ LAST spoke with Wright, the illustrious developer was talking up his latest project, HiveMind. "There's that character in *The Truman Show*, that director played by Ed Harris," Wright told us early in 2012. "Imagine if you had somebody like that behind you, trying to make your life more interesting and dramatic. That's what I'd like to have." Wright's concept is to intrude on our daily lives in benevolent ways across social media and mobile platforms, with the game digging up information about your surroundings to create a deep situational awareness of the player. While Wright didn't have an update on the project, he spent the majority of last year embedded in a legal dispute with Jawad Ansari, co-founder of HiveMind. Resolved in November 2012, it's unclear whether Wright will continue to pursue his cross-media project.



Sid Meier's SimGolf 2002

The Sims 2 2004

Spore 2008

Stupid Fun Club 2009

'What kind of life do I want to lead?'. In both cases I think the player was critical in determining goal state, and then you could look at someone's city – or family – and get a sense of who they were just by the way they were playing the game and what they were pursuing.

How do you make complicated systems to provide simple entertainment?

Well, for me, I break down what the major factors are. It's very much like building a model and you're looking at the major things that you want to model first; you look at what will impact those and you work through, like layers of an onion. You kind of have to build it in the right order from the inside out. And at the same time you're not really trying to replicate the system, you're trying to build more of a caricature of it. You want to exaggerate things, make things a little more dramatic or more obvious, and so in some sense it's very much a caricature of simulation.

Do you think this approach continues in today's industry?

Well, we've gone through this major arc. You know games started out as fairly simple affairs and small teams – with my first games I was the only person working on them – and over time they grew to more movie-like productions: tens of millions of dollars, hundreds or more people. I think that more recently, over the last five years or so, we've seen a major, major change in the games industry towards mobile, towards social, towards casual players, and a lot of the money in games is going towards things that are technically more simple, but socially more complex. The size of development teams is typically quite a bit smaller now for these sorts of games than it is for a triple-A console title. So we still have those blockbuster types of things, but in some sense the whole industry has diversified in platforms, in demographics and in genres. And in fact I think it's very healthy for the industry. I'm glad it happened. I think for a while we were at the risk of our industry going more of the way of comic books, where there was a group of diehard dedicated people doing these things, but it wasn't growing and it was never going to hit a mainstream audience.

What do you think was fundamental to this change?

I think accessibility for one thing. The fact that we all have – well, not all of us – but most people have a very powerful computer sitting in their pocket. It's instantly on, they can pull them out at a moment's notice. I think that a lot of people into gaming probably wouldn't bother about downloading or buying a CD and putting on your computer; but given the delivery mechanisms or distribution, I can hear about a cool game, pull out my iPhone and download it and be playing it within minutes. If you think about it, that's amazingly less friction than going down to

> "We can do very cool, significant things with much smaller budgets and much smaller teams"
> Will Wright, industry legend



Inset Wright continues to be fascinated with the world around him, hoping to craft more 'personal' games in the future.



SIMCITY LAUNCH PLAGUED WITH SERVER PROBLEMS. EA OFFERS FREE GAMES TO DISGRUNTLED MAYORS



Above Arguably, mobile free-to-play games such as EA's *The Simpsons: Tapped Out* and *FarmVille* have all lifted the template from Wright's original city-building simulator.

a software store, buying a CD and putting it in an Xbox.

A few years back at an art exhibition in Vancouver you said we were on the cusp of a 'Cambrian explosion of possibility' – is this kind of technology a part of that?

Well yeah, that's what we're seeing right now I think. We're seeing this vastly parallel exploration of the possibility space now. Just about any game you can imagine is out there somewhere in app or indie form or otherwise. So I see quite a bit more inventiveness and exploration of the game space now than I did even ten years ago. At some point it may settle down and we may see more genres than we had before – we might have 30 main genres instead of the main ten – but we'll be dealing with a much wider audience. I think games are becoming as diverse as books and movies.

What was the impetus behind your departure from Maxis?

Mostly, I just wanted to be a bit more experimental. I think the games industry is getting kind of ubiquitous and diverse enough where it's intersecting all these other things, like television, toys, people's daily lives, as well as the scale of development. You know when all the really big games were 30-40 million dollar productions – it's very hard to approach that with a small team without the resources of a large company. But that's changed a lot; the fact that we can do very cool, significant things with much smaller budgets and much smaller teams. It just made kind of made sense in that… sense.

What are your impressions of the *SimCity* reboot?

I like it a lot. It's interesting. In some sense it reminds me of the post-economic crash. It's not about making your city big, it's about making them not poor. I think they did a good job of balancing all the interrelated factors. At first it felt a little claustrophobic – you know with the size of the land – but after playing for a while I think it really makes a lot of sense. Because really it makes you focus more on interrelations of those factors, so you could make a city four times bigger but you'd be dealing with the exact same variables. By kind of focusing in on it, it feels more personal, and I really do want to zoom down and get a sense of what it feels like on the street. I think the visuals are just amazing; I love the tilt-shift focal lens. Visually it's great. It was my old art director, actually, that was lead designer, and he had a very definite vision about the way that it would feel. But yeah, I'm enjoying it quite a bit.

Below *Spore* was the last project that Will Wright worked on at Maxis, before departing the studio in 2009 to pursue more personal projects.





Studio: Linden Lab 2011

Studio: Syntertainment 2013

FURTHER READING

NowGamer.com



The month of April will be packed with the latest on Sony and Microsoft's impending next-generation consoles, as well as reviews for movie tie-in *Star Trek*, undead nightmare *Dead Island: Riptide* and superhero brawler *Injustice: Gods Among Us*. If you've still got room for more gaming nourishment, then log on for exclusive interviews, features and reports on all the happenings in the industry.

All About Space



Issue 11 of All About Space takes a look at the evolution of spacesuits over the past 50 years. There are also articles on the most powerful forces in the universe, dwarf planets, the top ten mysteries of space and much more, plus an exclusive interview with Apollo 11 astronaut Buzz Aldrin.

GreatDigitalMags.com

games™ is now available to read on any digital format thanks to our digital editions super-site, **greatdigitalmags.com**. The site allows you to enjoy your favourite mag on Mac, PC, iPad, Android devices and a whole host of other formats. There are some great subscription incentives too, only at **greatdigitalmags.com**.



AMERICAN MCGEE SUGGESTS HE MAY TAKE TO KICKSTARTER TO RAISE THE FUNDING FOR ALICE 3

the **#TRENDING**
with NowGamer.com's Ryan King



The grim future of online shooters



It's been seven years since Horse Armor was released, the notorious DLC for *Oblivion* that did exactly as the name suggested. Well no, that's not true. It didn't protect your horse in any manner at all, as you'd expect armour would, but it *looked* cool. And all for the princely sum of 200 Microsoft Points! Cue much laughter on various forums (no Twitter outrage – that wasn't a thing in 2006) and a mea culpa from Bethesda, who have since shown the ability to poke fun at themselves for the misguided release since then.

In 2013, we can buy a bacon skin for our guns in *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II*. It has no effect other than looking cool, and it's part of a skin pack that costs 160 Microsoft Points. Most of the outrage has been generated because the bacon doesn't really look like bacon and more like an abomination you'd try to fry when hungover, having forgotten you left it sizzling in the pan for half an hour.

In the meantime, *Gears Of War: Judgment* lets you buy double XP. It lasts for 200 matches, and if you want it you have to shell out 800 Microsoft Points, the equivalent of a full Xbox Live Arcade game. The Judgment Season Pass comes with a permanent double XP boost. If you want to level up, you can throw money at multiplayer until it happens. There has been some murmuring about the future of the industry, but nothing that would qualify as outrage, anxiety or concern.

Progress, then.

We've been battered with DLC scams so regularly and so hard this generation that if Horse Armor was to be released today for the first time, few would bother to bat an eyelid. But if the games industry is recalibrating itself to find ways to survive away from the traditional model of games being bought full-price at retail, then what's happening in its most popular console genre suggests worrying times lie ahead.

There's been no direct damage done just yet, as the FPS microtransactions are cosmetic. *Call Of Duty*'s weapon skins are just that, while levels in *Gears Of War: Judgment* only serve as shiny progress badges, unlocking character and weapon skins. But it reeks of publishers dipping their toes in unknown waters as this generation of consoles draws to a close, assessing the response and popularity of such ideas to help prep a full next-gen DLC assault. It's Horse Armor for the FPS, but the difference is it doesn't seem like a fumbled error – it seems deliberate and calculated.

The sad thing is that these microtransactions will likely find a big enough audience that publishers will continue with the tactic. The popularity of XP in shooters shows there's a thirst for easy progress. In doesn't matter how badly you do when you play the game itself, as it all counts towards progress and showing you that you're getting somewhere. It's why talk of kill-death ratios is dominant on Call Of Duty forums, over levels or prestige. One shows in-game skill, the other is relatively meaningless for the hardcore.



■ *Call Of Duty: Blacks Ops II* offers players the chance to download a bacon skin for their guns.

> How long will it be before the competitive aspects of FPS games are compromised with microtransactions?

How long will it be before the competitive aspects of FPS games are compromised with microtransactions? Say a damage boost that lasts ten games, or a minor permanent speed upgrade. The more essential an upgrade is to competing, the more likely players are to buy it. The only thing publishers would need to consider is not alienating a game's core fanbase. That's why these microtransaction moves at the end of this generation are more important than you may realise – they're testing the waters.

It's the continued direction of multiplayer shooters, which have moved from skill towards cheap gratification. They used to be dominant on PC, where the likes of *Quake* and *Unreal* demanded that you knew where to find weapons on the map and how to use them, and mouse precision separated the good players from the great. Now the FPS genre is about a war of attrition, battering other players with endless perks and kill streaks – unique titles and player skins now necessary to stand out because skill is no longer enough to tell players apart.

This isn't an argument against DLC, which can help extend the life of shooters, and *Call Of Duty*'s DLC maps are often stronger than the ones the games shipped with (*Modern Warfare 3* being the most obvious example). This isn't an argument against change or doing things differently, because trying something new is the only way the industry can learn how to do things right.

This is an argument that says progress is good, but only if we're all heading in the right direction. We're buying bacon skins today. What will we buy tomorrow?

Ryan King is editor of NOWGamer.com

THE UK'S BIGGEST MODERN POP CULTURE EVENTS

24-26 MAY 2013

MCM LONDON COMIC CON

EXCEL - ROYAL VICTORIA DOCK - LONDON





Finalist MCV Awards 2013
The market for computer & video games

MCM BIRMINGHAM COMIC CON
16 - 17 MARCH

MCM MANCHESTER COMIC CON
20 JULY

MCM SCOTLAND COMIC CON
7 SEPTEMBER

BUY TICKETS ONLINE



mcmexpo

WWW.MCMCOMICCON.COM

ExCeL LONDON
An ADNEC Group Company











MYM

Part of MCM EXPO GROUP

KIDS 10 and under GO FREE* Children (10 years & under) gain 'FREE GENERAL ENTRY' if accompanied by a full paying adult (restricted to 2 children per full paying adult). Images used herein for publicity purposes only.

COAST TO COAST
with Gray Nicholson



Lamenting the lack of innovation as we enter a so-called new age of gaming



As we approach despair – following 90 minutes on the grim state of our food industry, structured to provide cheap, tasty rubbish that's making us fat, sick and lazy – the last words of Robert Kenner's documentary, *Food, Inc*, are left to fifth-generation farmer Troy Roush. "People have got to start demanding good wholesome food of us," he says, squinting into the sun. "We'll deliver, I promise you. We're very ingenious people."

These words resurfaced in my head following the bland menu unveiled at PlayStation Meeting 2013, which suited many appetites, but not mine. I seemed to be the only one hoping for nutritionally dense miracle food, while others were happy to find their old Big Macs, just 25 per cent bigger and with extra sauce.

It appalled me to see, in trailer after trailer, how the powerful new hardware we'd been waiting for (during an unusually long product cycle) would be exploited for nothing more than the same creatively stalled staples we have now, but with better textures. Not only that: how such mundane, incremental progress was accepted – even applauded – by others in my demographic.

Having aired my disappointment, one friend talked passionately about how excited he was for the eventual *Battlefield* game that he hoped the system would run at 1080p and 60 frames per second; another dreamt of nothing more blissful than similar technical performance from a hypothetical *Far Cry 4*. Around the web, from pros and Joes alike, reaction was certainly more mixed, but because they didn't know what it would look like or how much it would cost – not because its games were banal.

> The demos made it obvious that there will be no quantum shift. The business of playing games will proceed very much as it does today

When did our expectations fall so low? A shooting one. A racing one. A dungeon one. A puzzle one. Why is this enough for people – the same stuff, but shinier? We used to feel like new console launches would blast the walls out of our virtual playpen, radically redefining the limits of possibility, with enough muscle to muster the depth, detail and nuance we knew was missing. How sad to settle for more pixels per second.

The demos made it obvious that there will be no quantum shift. The business of playing games will proceed very much as it does today: overturned trucks will continue to form conspicuous seals across city streets; only one in a row of six identical doors will open; overacting wax people will still deliver plot while your input is suspended – others will repeat the same phrase every time you pass. Events will remain largely scripted, like a theme park ride: this way, a tightly timed objective will stop you snooping around; that way, sorry – a glass wall.



Same old explosions, same old corridors, same old swaying gun: where's the imagination?

Yoplait got people to buy boring old yoghurt again by adding sugar to it; there are five teaspoons worth in a pot. Sony is leaning on our other addiction, social media, to sell these old games again. PS4's big advances are all in sharing, but broadcasting a live video stream – or generating a boring tweet every time I change gear – is not gameplay, and even my 60 frames per second friends are apathetic about such features.

Is it possible our developers are like Troy Roush, willing and able to provide satisfying and sustaining fare if only we'd demand it over our stodgy processed diet? How many transformative experiences, of wild unbound imagination or eerily interactive worlds, have been missed because we endlessly accept violent parkour, shiny cars and the swaying gun?

Yes, some people were upset about the lack of a plastic box to photograph. For me, the lack of imagination was more frustrating.

Gray Nicholson is a former videogames journalist who now resides in America, acknowledging his roots as he sees fit

SimCity's always-online dilemma

➔ Suffering the very same indignation that plagued Blizzard after the traumatic launch of Diablo III last year, EA has come under fire due to its divisive choice to implement a persistent internet connection requirement for its long-awaited SimCity reboot. Long loading times, disconnections and crashes were just a few of a litany of complaints voiced by the incensed community, with servers unable to cope with the volume of day-one traffic. We ask the games™ readership how they view EA's controversial approach to its world-building life simulator.

"[I'm] not interested until they get an offline mode. Expensive game and I can't play away from home, on holidays, etc. It's nonsense."
@Derik140, Twitter

"The most pointless and awful trend to infect gaming possibly ever."
@Retro101uk, Twitter

"[I] can't see it being a problem so long as the servers stay up."
Arthur Scroggins, Facebook

"Seems they didn't learn the lesson of *The Sims 2* (which was 'don't punish honest buyers for others' piracy')."
@jdblanset, Twitter

"EA = Evil, corporate, money-grabbing, charlatans who DON'T care about videogames at all. They just want your money. The ONLY new and innovative things EA have introduced into the gaming industry in the last ten years, is more ways to control the content that YOU buy, and to introduce more ways to fleece more money off YOU and others whether it's while YOU are playing the game or whether YOU are selling it on. It's no wonder EA was voted the worst company in America the other year."
Leeray666, games™ forum

"Could have been handled better, but then didn't really need handling at all. It's a problem of their own making."
@Beemoh, Twitter

"I think people have overreacted to be honest. Once server teething problems are gone (which they nearly are!), it's all good!"
@samjermy87, Twitter

Has EA killed Dead Space?

→ Rumour: EA cancels its premier horror franchise

The reports of our death were greatly exaggerated," tweeted Visceral Games' Dino Ignacio in response to reports that EA has canned the *Dead Space* franchise after poor sales of the third main entry. This follows sizeable lay-offs at Visceral Montreal, who were apparently tasked with creating early prototypes of a fourth entry in the saga.

While both the developer and EA vehemently deny the rumours, the publisher had previously stated that the latest entry, *Dead Space 3*, would need to shift roughly 5 million units to justify the continuation of the brand – which is perhaps partially to blame for the overly designed action-slanted approach to the sequel. Yet, *Dead Space 3* sold 25 per cent fewer units in its first week in the UK than its predecessor.

Even COO Peter Moore commented on the speculation, dismissing it as "standard, shoddy website journalism recipe, born out of a desperate need to increase click-through rates to support advertising revenue". But with EA currently in the process of promoting additional DLC for *Dead Space 3*, the publisher isn't likely to issue a statement in a hurry. It seems Isaac Clarke's troubles are far from over.

MARVEL
IRON MAN 3™
TONY STARK
1/6TH SCALE LIMITED EDITION COLLECTIBLE FIGURINE


MARVEL
TM & © 2013 Marvel & Subs
FULL RANGE AVAILABLE AT
WWW.MOTHERSBASEMENT.CO.UK

ON STRANGER TIDES

AFTER THE MOST DIVISIVE ENTRY IN THE MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR FRANCHISE TO DATE, UBISOFT TAKES TO THE HIGH SEAS FOR ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG, A DRAMATIC DESIGN OVERHAUL DESTINED TO OFFER AS MANY SURPRISES AS IT DOES SALTY SEA DOGS. GAMES™ TALKS EXCLUSIVELY WITH UBISOFT ABOUT THE BOLD NEW CHAPTER IN THE EVOLVING SAGA





WHO IS EDWARD KENWAY? The grandfather of *Assassin's Creed III*'s Ratonhnhaké:ton (Connor); an English privateer and ruthless pirate; owner of a flowing bouffant maintained to L'Oréal perfection; possessor of a rapacious appetite for women and a jawline fit for breaking walnuts. We knew this about the man weeks before Ubisoft officially announced *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, the studio's marketing ship so full of leaks that if it was one of the sequel's hulking vessels it's safe to say that it would now be resting at the bottom of the ocean.

This early glimpse painted an awkward picture of young Edward as a walking cliché, possessing all the embellishments that have come to define the modern videogame anti-hero: an array of firearms strapped to his waist, a facial scar delicately placed so not to betray his Parisian catwalk splendour and twin rapiers resting tightly at the hip. At a cursory glance, there's little to distinguish the buccaneer protagonist of the sixth mainline entry in the Assassin's saga from that of any of his genre brethren.

It's incredibly likely that after the proverbial wet blanket that was the self-righteous Connor, developer Ubisoft Montreal understood the need for another debonair swashbuckler to front its newest entry, one with an easily traceable journey from impetuous brigand to a decisive figure in the war between Assassins and the Templars.

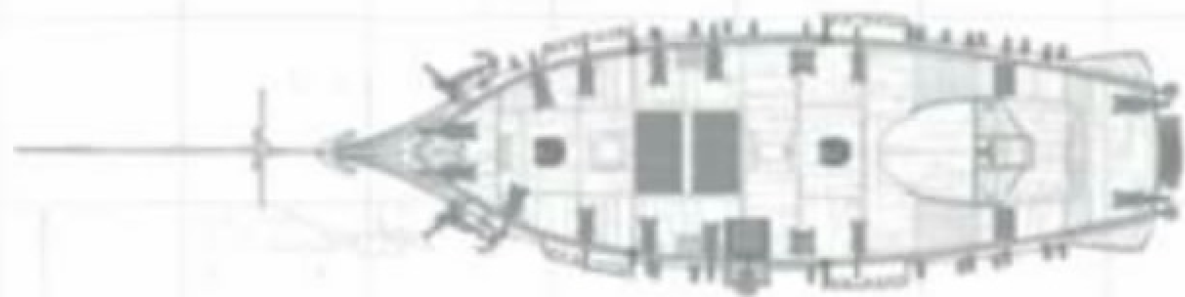
Edward's personality has been informed as much by Ezio Auditore da Firenze as his own future grandson, then, but while previous stories have been fuelled by spilled blood and pivoted on the need for retribution, *Black Flag* opts for a different approach.

There's no revolution here, no tyrannical rule that needs to be put to a stop. It's the early 18th Century (taking place mostly in and around 1715), a time of selfishness and disorder, of unscrupulous villains and immoral deeds. It's an era later referred to as the 'Golden Age Of Piracy', and our so-called hero is positioned within the very dark heart of this setting. As the pitch-black flags of the ship unfurl, adorned with the familiar skull and crossed swords, it's clear that Ubisoft is pushing the narrative into an intriguing position of moral ambiguity, making for a protagonist not easily defined.

"He doesn't really know who he is or what he wants," game director Ashraf Ismail tells games™, taking a break from development at the Montreal studio. "He's a British guy who had a very poor upbringing. Because of this, he's a bit selfish and a bit reckless, but at the same time he's a very charismatic guy. Early in life, he decides to become a sailor and goes to the West Indies, where the lure of piracy is too strong for him to resist – given that selfish side of him, the idea of fame, riches and gold pulls him in pretty powerfully."

It's not until a chance encounter with a member of the Assassin's Order that Kenway's penchant for life's excesses is called into question, which is where his story begins. "[He] meets [an] assassin at an early point in the story," Ismail continues, further delving into the character's background. "They start to train him because they need something from him and he starts learning about the Creed. This is where he has this deep internal struggle – the Creed is really





Ubisoft Montreal is the primary developer, but the studio has roped in Ubisoft satellite studios Annecy, Bucharest, Kiev, Montpellier, Quebec, Singapore and Sofia to work on development



Ubisoft continues to stress that this will be a darker, grittier interpretation of pirate lore and not another Disney cartoon.



a selfless philosophy about letting humanity grow without necessarily controlling it, whereas Edward begins the game really just wanting fame and gold. But no matter how much he gets, he doesn't find happiness. If anything, he's losing the people around him. His main motivation is trying to figure out who he is in life."



THERE IS A WORRY HERE OF COURSE: THAT PLAYERS WILL ENTER THE STORY OF EDWARD AT A JUNCTURE IN HIS LIFE THAT WILL SACRIFICE THE DEPRAVITY AND LAWLESSNESS SYNONYMOUS WITH THE SCURVY-RIDDEN SETTING. Players have invested in the Assassin's code of honour over the course of the last five games, and everything history and The Walt Disney Company have taught us about pirates – murderers, criminals, drunks and parrot owners – contradicts those ethics.

This narrative dissonance has been a major hurdle for Ismail and his team when they pinpointed the suitable era for the next chapter during the middle of *Assassin's Creed III*'s development. "We had a lot of questions about pirates and assassins," admits Ismail. "Do they really mix together? How could the two exist? But the thing is, from a pure gameplay perspective, we thought the connection was really… well, we use the word 'seamless' a lot, but it was *seamless*."

Seamless indeed. Edward's skillset, amassed through many years of plundering and warfare, better lends itself to the innate abilities of an assassin more so than any of his franchise predecessors. Given that pirates were essentially sailors, their professional necessity to climb rigging and masts, justifies Edward's navigation abilities; stealth was also a talent that Edward would have acquired, given a pirate's penchant for thievery. And then there's the combination of swords and guns in combat – two weapons that were a staple of these nefarious seafarers. It also enables Ubisoft to return to naval exploration and warfare, the one facet of *Assassin's Creed III* that was universally applauded.

"We loved what *Assassin's Creed III* did, but really it was just a toe in the water," states Ismail, clearly a fan of both last year's maritime appendage and clever wordplay. "It was optional content, so they only pushed it as far as they needed to push it. But for us, because the naval element is so important, we had to really revamp how we thought about combat and depth in particular."

Edward commands the Jackdaw, a far more robust and impressive vessel than Connor's galleon. It's touted as 60 metres long packing 26 sails. Starting with six cannons, the ship can be upgraded to hold an additional 50, as well as mines and swivel guns. While upgrading your ship in *Assassin's Creed III* bared little impact on the outcome of your naval adventures,

FURTHER READING

Exploring Assassin's Creed's multifaceted universe

"The *Assassin's Creed* brand is pretty big now," admits *Black Flag*'s game director Ashraf Ismail, when asked how important the fiction's expanded universe is to the core canon. "We actually have a brand team that works outside of the development team. It's a group of designers and writers who manage everything that happens with the brand, everything from stories in comic books and novels to figurines. This team is really in charge of everything *AC*, and they're making sure that all the stories line up and that the grander story of *Assassin's Creed* – and there is one – makes sense. You'll see more information, whether in a comic, on Facebook or in an app… there are more stories to tell, and we'll use those to flesh out characters and the universe outside of the console games."





here it'll be essential to tackling missions and surviving against other adventitious sailors. As a ship approaches, Kenway can pull out his spyglass and assess a ship based on its danger level and the value of the cargo it carries, and choose to attack it as a pirate. You start by firing the artillery, depleting enough health before you can order your crew (who you can recruit from around the Caribbean) to throw grappling hooks and pull the ships together.

Freeing himself from the ship's wheel, Kenway is able to either continue the battle from the comfort of his own ship or board the enemy vessel with his crew and fight through the enemies, completing randomly generated goals indicated on the map, such as killing a specified number of sailors or a particular crew member. "You could go in headlong with a rope swing. You could go in guns blazing. You could sneak on board by jumping in the water, swimming round the back of the ship and climbing up the other side. You could climb the mast and run along the top of the map, going in using your navigation skills," enthuses Ismail, who continues to reel off a list of scenarios before catching a breath. "This is the perfect place for the gameplay to merge everything that is pirates and everything that is *Assassin's Creed*."

As the word 'seamless' makes its way into conversation a few more times we begin to suspect that Ubisoft has demanded Ismail to hit a certain quota, but his point is nonetheless crucial: the world has to feel authentic, realistic and organic, which includes being unencumbered by loading screens. "It's one of the best things that *Assassin's Creed* has brought to gaming; the worlds you interact with are that much deeper than other game worlds you might experience," begins Ismail. "This was something that we thought right away – the naval world has to be *seamless* and this was our mindset from the beginning. We wanted to make sure that the Caribbean really felt like one big world that was logical and credible, but also beautiful. And we knew that we wanted to have gameplay that asked the player to transition between land and water, and to make sure that the flow isn't broken or that it doesn't feels like it's just maps that are loaded separately."



THAT'S NO EASY FEAT GIVEN THE STAGGERING SCALE OF THE PROJECT. THE THREE MAIN URBAN LOCATIONS IN *BLACK FLAG* ARE HAVANA, KINGSTON AND THE UNOFFICIAL CAPITAL OF THE REPUBLIC OF PIRATES, NASSAU. This is where the more traditional *Assassin's* elements will appear – the parkour rooftop runs, daring sword fights and improbable jumps into conveniently placed stacks of hay – but there's much more to see besides these prominent hubs. There will be around 50 locations, with



■ EDWARD KENWAY HAS POPPED UP BEFORE IN *ASSASSIN'S CREED* LORE, MENTIONED IN THE *ACIII* TIE-IN NOVEL FORSAKEN. WHAT LITTLE INFORMATION IT GIVES IS THAT, ULTIMATELY, EDWARD SHUCKED HIS RECKLESS LIFESTYLE TO BECOME AN HONOURABLE MEMBER OF THE ASSASSIN'S ORDER.

"WE'RE MAKING SURE THAT, ON THE OCEAN, THERE'S ALWAYS AN ACTIVITY HAPPENING AROUND THE PLAYER. THERE'S A ROUGH PACING TO IT, BUT AROUND EVERY 30 SECONDS, SOMETHING HAPPENS"

ASHRAF ISMAIL, UBISOFT MONTREAL



fishing villages, jungles, forts, coves, Mayan ruins, deserted islands and plantations to explore. Players can even take to exploring the ocean floor with a period-accurate diving bell. It ensures that the world is never short of an activity and that the ocean will constantly provide surprises.

"This was something that we worked very hard on and we still continue to work on it," says Ismail, currently in the middle of development. "We're making sure that on the sea there's always an activity happening around the player. There's a rough pacing to it, but around every 30 seconds something happens. This event won't force the player to interact with it, but we'll motivate players to do so, whether it's a storm or a harpooning event or even different faction ships fighting each other, and you can jump into the fight. We constantly have events happening. We do a lot of playtesting to make sure the naval part is not considered boring or uneventful.

"And of course, once you visit locations, you'll be able to teleport there – if a player has already been to a location, we give them the comfort of being able to fast travel there, *Skyrim*-style," he adds.

The comparison to 2011's *The Elder Scrolls* sequel is pertinent given the magnitude of the in-game world, but this transition from predominantly landlocked action to a expansive, boundless open world of land and sea is a bold jump strongly reminiscent of *The Legend Of Zelda: Wind Waker*.

"It's really a brand new development philosophy," muses Ismail. "It's something we've never done in *Assassin's Creed*, to have a world where you have all these locations that are just connected by water and not directly to one another. It has forced us to rethink how enemies and crowds behave differently in these kinds of locations, plus it has also changed the way we think about the layout for stealth. Instead of having a big city with crowds, now we have to consider things like coconut islands and jungles – how can you do stealth in these places? It has brought up tons of questions that we didn't even realise we had to answer. Even the pacing for the player has changed; how will they go from Havana to Kingston, for example? How do we make that really fluid and fun for players? It was a big challenge, but we were able to come up with a lot of cool features to help players and make it really exciting."

> "WE LEARNED A LOT FROM FAR CRY 3 ABOUT HOW TO HANDLE MISSIONS WHILE LETTING PLAYERS HAVE A CERTAIN DEGREE OF FREEDOM"
> ASHRAF ISMAIL, UBISOFT MONTREAL

As the discussion delves into the particulars of the naval combat such as reading trajectories and the implementation of free aim in combat (essentially lending a third-person shooter element to the game), it's clear that Ubisoft is keen to demonstrate how skill has been re-established – harking back to the original outing. The franchise has been criticised for over-simplifying (or 'streamlining', as the studio would prefer to call it) combat and assassinations as the series has progressed, which left some pivotal moments of last year's effort feeling dismally hollow, such as the climactic chase through a vessel under construction. Ismail acknowledges the gradual preference towards cinematic action over player agency, but expresses a clear desire to return to the open-endedness of assassinations that established the series. "The big push we've done with *Assassin's Creed IV* is that we wanted to have something [similar] to the assassination setups of the first game,"

BRINGING THE SAGA TO THE NEXT-GENERATION

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM BLACK FLAG ON SONY AND MICROSOFT'S NEW CONSOLES

We know that *Black Flag* is set for simultaneous (or near-simultaneous) release on next-generation hardware at the end of the year, but Ubisoft assures that it will be the same fundamental game experience across all platforms. "We're really focusing on *Assassin's Creed IV* as one core game experience," states game director Ashraf Ismail, before acknowledging a significant visual improvement. "We have a team of artists, technical artists and programmers who are really pushing the next-gen visuals. I'm really biased in saying this, but it's looking stunning – the Caribbean in the next-gen versions is really gorgeous. But we're also supporting the features of next gen, both announced and unannounced. We will have some surprises for next-gen consoles, feature-wise."



THE CREW

A look into the history of Assassin's Creed IV's band of ruthless rebels

Benjamin Hornigold 1715-1718



A PROMINENT pirate during the period, Benjamin Hornigold's sketchy background makes him perfectly positioned as a possible Templar antagonist. At one point he commanded five pirate vessels, plundering merchant vessels as he saw fit on his 30-gun sloop named the Ranger, alongside his second-in-command Blackbeard. Later seeking a pardon, he would betray his brethren and hunt down other pirates, including Blackbeard. He died in a shipwreck during a hurricane in 1719.

Anne Bonny 1719-1720



ONE OF the few famous female pirates of the time, Anne Bonny rose through the ranks after marrying fellow pirate James Bonny, having an affair with John 'Calico Jack' Rackham (later joining his crew) and discovering that another crew member, Mark Read, was actually a woman in disguise. Bonny was later spared from a hanging and disappeared from all historical record.

Edward 'Blackbeard' Teach 1716-1718



WITHOUT DOUBT the most notorious pirate to ever sail the seven seas, Blackbeard appears prominently in *Assassin's Creed IV*, allying with Edward Kenway during the game's compact narrative. Exactly how he features in the plot is being kept tightly under wraps, but for game director Ashraf Ismail, the cast of real-life characters offered an opportunity to dispel a few myths. "For me personally, the most interesting thing that came out of the research was the cast of characters," he tells games™. "A guy like Blackbeard... I think everybody has a misconception of who Blackbeard was. He's very legendary, almost a caricature. But when we looked into the history, what we found was that he was this really brilliant guy who had a very different outlook on life."

Charles Vane 1716-1719



CHARLES VANE made a name for himself preying upon English and French shipping. He became a leader of those who refused the King's pardon for pirates, who wished to return to an honest life, instead forming allegiances with Calico Jack, Blackbeard and Edward England. He later seized the town of Nassau in 1718, before attacking a French Warship – a blunder that would lead to mutiny aboard his ship.

Jack 'Calico Jack' Rackham 1717-1720



RACKHAM IS best known for the design of his Jolly Roger flag – a skull with crossed swords – which contributed to the proliferation of the design. Rackham had perhaps one of the most bombastic careers, beginning with the plunder of various small vessels and then capturing large merchant ships, stealing an English sloop that was seized by the Spanish and evaded capture by colonial powers.



■ THERE SEEMS TO BE A DEEPER SENSE OF ADVENTURE IN *BLACK FLAG*. MUCH LIKE *FAR CRY 3*, THE SIDE MISSIONS FOCUS ON EXPLORATION AND DISCOVERY, RATHER THAN FOLLOWING INDICATORS ON THE MAP.

he says. "We're pushing to make sure that players can use any kind of gameplay and any tool they want to accomplish their goals. The setups are much more open – we'll introduce an enemy, we'll drop him into some really interesting level design then just ask the player to assassinate him as they wish. We're pushing hard to make sure that player choice is really important, and, as such, we're doing a lot less hand-holding."

"WE'RE PUSHING HARD TO MAKE SURE THAT PLAYER CHOICE IS REALLY IMPORTANT, AND AS SUCH WE'RE DOING A LOT LESS HAND-HOLDING"
ASHRAF ISMAIL, UBISOFT MONTREAL

IT'S HELPED THAT THE NATURE OF THE MARITIME FRAMING OFFERS MYRIAD REFRESHING LOCATIONS TO EXPLORE, ENABLING AN EXPRESSIVE LEVEL OF FREEDOM TO EXPERIMENT WITH LEVEL DESIGN. "We have quite a few targets, so where we place them will be the thing that pushes certain types of gameplay," Ismail explains. "Say we have a target in the jungle. In jungles, you're encouraged to play stealthily, because they're very dangerous places. So yes, there are locations that push you towards certain styles, but I will say that no gameplay is ever forced in these open assassinations. Playtesting is a really important part of this development. We playtest all our missions and assassinations to make sure that people not only understand what they have to do, but also have the tools to do what they *want* to do. We learned a lot from Far Cry 3 about how to handle missions while letting players have a certain degree of freedom, and in fact we have a bunch of the *Far Cry 3* developers on our team, so they're helping push the open-endedness while maintaining really good pacing and rhythm for the game itself."

The effect of having a few members of the *Far Cry 3* team on board is perhaps a few stylistic choices – not least the fact that Kenway can sucker punch a shark in the face (probably). But the overall milieu of *Black Flag* is less po-faced that its predecessors, indulging in the delights of its dishonest cast of misfit pirates. "You can't have a pirate game without a tavern fight, right?" laughs Ismail, as games™ returns to talking about both the setting and how Kenway fits within that world. "[We] take some liberties with the general assassin rules. As pirates, we allow players to pretty much plunder any ship they see. Edward isn't trained – he's not a ninja. But he's efficient and brutal because he has a lot of experience in fighting. And yes, that includes fighting dirty. We have hand-to-hand combat that's much closer to what we think a pirate would fight like, much more like dirty boxing.



"His personality doesn't change, but his philosophy on life does," continues Ismail. "It's really exciting to see a character grow. I think from the trailer, people get the impression that he's this suave and debonair – but also reckless – kind of guy. He is, but there's a lot more depth to his character. He goes through a deep internal struggle as the story progresses. As developers, this is really exciting to work with; it gives us a lot of room to breathe and a lot of room to develop the narrative and gameplay."

THE BACKDROP ALSO OFFERED SOME SURPRISING LIBERTIES WHEN IT CAME TO REAL-LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES, NOT TO MENTION THAT THE AMBIGUITY SURROUNDING THE DEMISE OF SEVERAL KEY FIGURES OF THE TIME BENEFITTED THE TEAM WHEN IT CAME TO CONSTRUCTING ELABORATE ASSASSINATION SEQUENCES. "When we started, we knew we wanted to create a credible 18th Century pirate experience," explains



■ UBISOFT HAS IMPLEMENTED FREE AIM IN COMBAT, WHICH WILL DELIGHT FANS OF THIRD-PERSON SHOOTING. IT SHOULD PLACATE THOSE THAT CRITICISED THE FRANCHISE FOR HAND-HOLDING.

Ismail. "And as we started studying the characters and events, what we found was that there were some really breathtaking events that happened that we weren't expecting. For example: the escape from Nassau. At some point Nassau was this pirate haven, but the British came and seized it, and a bunch of the pirates escaped pretty much in the most Michael Bay-way possible, blowing up half of the city. This actually happened; this was a real event."

Ismail refrains from divulging more information into specific events, or exactly how the Templars fit into the story – no doubt due in some part to a sturdier marketing ship sailing towards the game's release at the end of the year. We're assured that the Templars fit logically within *Black Flag*'s narrative.

"One of the things we always do when choosing a time period is to look for times with conflict in them that we're able to take advantage of," Ismail explains. "In this case, there are these lawless men in a lawless time and they disband from the empires, disconnect from the British, French and Spanish, and decide to create their own republic. Just in this political intrigue, this conflict between major empires… it's easy to see how the Templars could fit into this. They're trying to control the world and to control the progression of humanity. So no, including the Templar story in the game wasn't necessarily hard. Making sure that we meet and assassinate important historical figures – now *that* proved a bit more difficult."

We glean from the director's chuckling that perhaps he's understating the challenge, but it's clear that he's dedicated to grounding the period in realism, dispensing of Depp-like campiness, and the parrots and doubloons of Robert Louis Stevenson. "We felt that the credible version of this history has not been told," explains Ismail. "This is one of the main reasons we chose this time period. In media it's always been romanticised and we really felt that no-one has done a credible version before, and that's something really exciting for us."

So it's educating players on a distorted time period, then? "'Educate' is a strong word," laughs Ismail. "But in all honesty, history *is Assassin's Creed* – there always needs to be something that excites people about the history of these locales. We're not necessarily going to say that we're teaching history. But what we'd love is to show players something credible enough that they'd want to go and research the time period for themselves. At the end of the day, we are a game and we do have liberty to play with history a little bit."

And play they will, switching from plundering sunken ships to bar brawls; from harpooning whales to skulking through jungles and assassinating nefarious foes – blurring the line between fact and fiction in the *Assassin's* series' own inimitable way. All done in a manner that will no doubt be, of all things, completely *seamless*.

■ THE *ASSASSIN'S CREED III* AND *BLACK FLAG* TEAMS WORKED CLOSELY FOR FIVE MONTHS ON THE FUNDAMENTALS OF NAVAL EXPLORATION AND COMBAT, BEFORE SPLITTING INTO THEIR OWN SEPARATE DEVELOPMENT GROUPS. FOR OVER A YEAR THE BLACK FLAG TEAM HAVE BEEN EXPANDING THE PREMISE INTO AN OPEN-WORLD SETTING.



BACK TO THE FUTURE

UBISOFT EXPLAINS HOW IT HAS UPDATED THE MODERN DAY STORY IN BLACK FLAG

"Desmond's saga ended with *Assassin's Creed III*, but we pick up right after it," confirms game director Ashraf Ismail when asked how the modern-day story fits into the narrative. "[Desmond's story] took place in 2012 and so now we're in 2013 – our present day is also going to take place in 2013. Animus technology has progressed and now allows anybody to go into the DNA ancestry of someone else. This gave us a very interesting advantage. We wanted to bring players closer to the narrative and make them feel like they're really part of the *Assassin's Creed* universe, so the present-day hero is the player."

Given how universally loathed Desmond had become by the time *Assassin's Creed III* rolled around, it's a canny choice on the part of the developer to add a personal touch to the modern story. Clearly customisation will be key to investing players into the story and, potentially, saved game files could well inform further sequels.





"If you were one of the people where there were ten guys standing around smoking cigarettes and watching you play, you had arrived at the arcade"

GREG RIZZER, VISCERAL STUDIOS

WHY I ♥...

Ghouls 'N Ghosts

GREG RIZZER, VISCERAL STUDIOS

My favourite game of all time would probably be Capcom's Ghouls 'N Ghosts*... Mainly because it was a game that had the first successful home port on the Sega Genesis, which was so much like the arcade version that I could go to the arcade and finish it on one quarter – which was an amazing feat on a game of that difficulty.*

So the reason why it's my favourite game of all time is because it made me feel like a bit of a celebrity at the arcade. Back in my day, that was a big deal. If you were one of the people where there were ten guys standing around smoking cigarettes and watching you play, you had arrived *at the arcade. To me it's just a fantastic game, [but] it's also one of my best memories of being a gamer and being around the industry when arcades were everything.*





THE CITY AS YOUR WEAPON

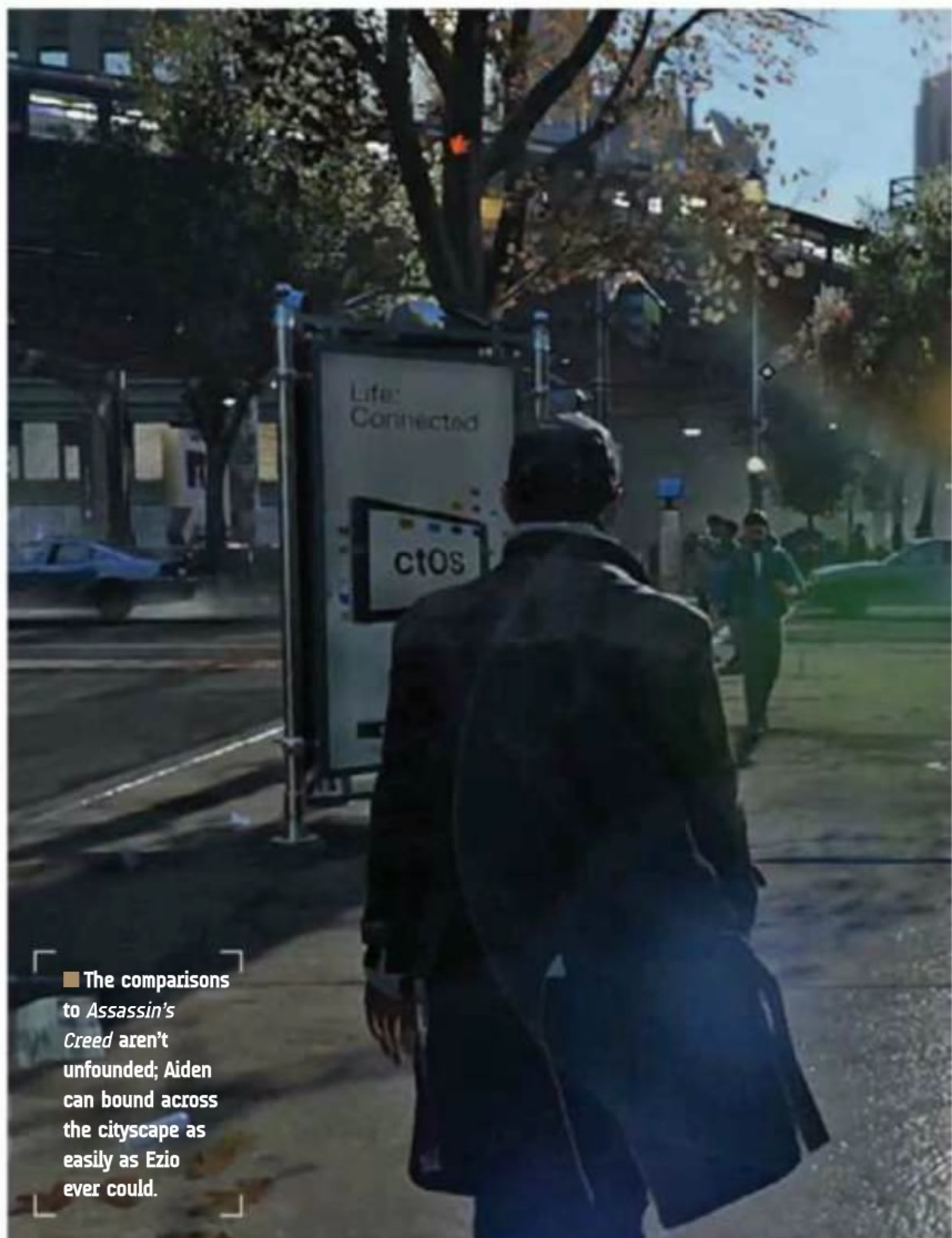
WHILE AIDEN will have a selection of guns and retractable blunt objects at his disposal in taking revenge on the criminals of Chicago, it's the city itself that provides players with a new way to experience an open world. Aiden can tap into the supercomputer that runs the city with his phone, which he can then use to his advantage. So far we've seen him blow fuse boxes to slow down a running criminal, change traffic lights to create multi-car pile-ups and even slow down a train long enough to jump on top to make his escape. This all happens in real-time, dynamically and on the move; it's pretty breathtaking to see in motion.



Thanks to the city being run via one centralised operating system, Aiden is able to hack into everything it has to offer.







The comparisons to *Assassin's Creed* aren't unfounded; Aiden can bound across the cityscape as easily as Ezio ever could.

Aiden's back story is being kept secret by Ubisoft, but leaked marketing material hinted at a protagonist with a troubled past

Watch Dogs

CONCEPT Ubisoft unleash a brand new IP at the tail end of one generation and the dawn of another. Hack the entire city and make it your playground.

Redefining the sandbox

Are we not victims of our dedication to the future? Just as the world continues to spin, we continue to sync our lives to a broader ecosystem. Social networks display our lives on a timeline, servers in a warehouse are entrusted to protect our finances and, as the past year has shown, our videogame consoles can be pried open digitally to compromise both entirely.

Seemingly not a month goes by without an incident of hacking or cybercrime causing irreversible damage; a scary thought when you consider everything we do online is openly available through a friend request. It's funny really: the more we put of ourselves online the more we become another entry in a system – trading individuality for connectivity.

Much like many of Ubisoft Montreal's projects, *Watch Dogs* is an easy sell. With any new IP, Ubisoft is known to blend the lines between genres to create a more approachable experience. *Far Cry* dances with the supernatural while *Assassin's Creed* plays with science-fiction tropes – though the studio is playing it straight with *Watch Dogs*. Hinging instead on a grounded world to sell the experience, the all-too-familiar façade of privacy fuels Ubisoft's exciting new venture into the next generation.

"The instability of our hyper-connected reality is omnipresent in the news worldwide. Everyone at least has a friend who's had issues with either credit card or privacy thievery," says creative director Jonathan Morin when considering what it is about *Watch Dogs* that resonates with players even at this early stage. "It talks about us as a society. It makes us think about our day-to-day lives and how it will shape our future. In the end, we can easily relate to it."

Our playground is a near-future Chicago – one that houses the country's most advanced computer system; a network that controls almost every piece of the city's technology. With security cameras on every street corner, and electricity and technology all powered through one centralised operating system, it wouldn't take much for one man with a grudge to take it upon himself to dismantle society.

Enter Aiden Pierce, a former thug turned master hacker who becomes embroiled in a quest for revenge following the death of his family. Ubisoft is keeping tight-lipped about his past, but one thing's for certain: with Aiden able to use the city's infrastructure as his arsenal, a new videogame experience is about to be born.

/// "We can easily understand how it works. We believe next generation should be heavily focused on new gameplay experiences. Hacking everything a city has to offer dynamically certainly fits that goal. I think players know next-generation games will be more beautiful, but what they want is new experiences. So everything people see in our game right now is not only true, it is fully systemic and based on player's expression. It is this philosophy tied to the exotic tools the game has to offer that gets people excited about how they will interact with our game world."

Following the PlayStation Meeting in February, the industry has been ablaze with talk of *Watch Dogs*. Ubisoft confirmed a debut on PlayStation 4, while affirming that wild open-world concept presented at E3 the

> "Watch Dogs goes beyond the limits of today's open-world games by giving players the ability to control an entire city"
>
> YVES GUILLEMOT UBISOFT

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Release: TBA
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Ubisoft Montreal is one of the largest studios in the world, housing over 2,000 employees working over a multitude of properties. The Canada-based studio is responsible for some of gaming's most beloved franchises and titles, helping to revive *Prince Of Persia*, instil tactical warfare into our minds with *Tom Clancy* titles, and eventually redefine open world and first-person shooters with *Assassin's Creed* and *Far Cry*.

Developer History

Assassin's Creed 2007 [Multi]
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas 2006 [Multi]
Prince Of Persia: Sands Of Time 2003 [Multi]

High Point

Whether it's slinking through darkness as a government assassin, bounding over rooftops as yet another assassin or creeping through the jungle… Ubisoft Montreal *loves* letting you loose as assassins.

previous year was very much a reality. For a game so focused on the idea of connectivity and social intrusion, there couldn't have been a better pairing than that of the PS4. It's certainly no surprise, then, that when Morin presented *Watch Dogs* to Sony the two hit it off immediately.

"When we showed the game to Sony they understood it right away. They did because the 'always-connected' vision they have of our industry is the very same we are thriving for on *Watch Dogs*. So it was easy to extrapolate from there," says Morin.

"As for what it brings to the table in terms of technology, I would say I am not a big fan of technology driven game concept," he claims, perhaps commenting on David Cage's assertion at the PlayStation Meeting that greater polygons translate to greater game experiences. "I firmly believe creativity is what drives people. So in our team we always pushed a crazy vision and then let the experts on every field see how they can go around the barriers in order to achieve the impossible. So in many ways our team was already in a next-generation 'game experience' state of mind."

/// That's not to say Morin isn't excited by the physical possibilities of the next generation; in fact, he is very interested in what the next consoles will do in terms of speeding up loading times and improving artificial intelligence. These are important aspects of *Watch Dogs*, boasting an open world for Aiden to hack and explore while dealing out his own brand of criminal justice.

Watch Dogs has been in development for four years at Ubisoft Montreal, which has allowed the developer to create a new engine codenamed Disrupt. While it looks to have a lot in common with the *Assassin's* engine – with Aiden able to hop, scale and vault across buildings and environments with ease – Disrupt allows the developer to completely re-establish the restraints of the sandbox. Couple that with the power of next-generation systems, and *Watch Dogs* is somehow getting more exciting every time we see it.

"When the PS4 showed up it did bring new possibilities to improve graphics and every AI systems we have. But in the same way we did for four years already, we will continue to look beyond what is possible to achieve in order to bring this little something extra out there for players to enjoy. And from what we've seen so far, the PS4 seems to be great to work with in that regard. So expect more AI behaviors, more realistic consequences to your actions and an overall improvement in visuals and

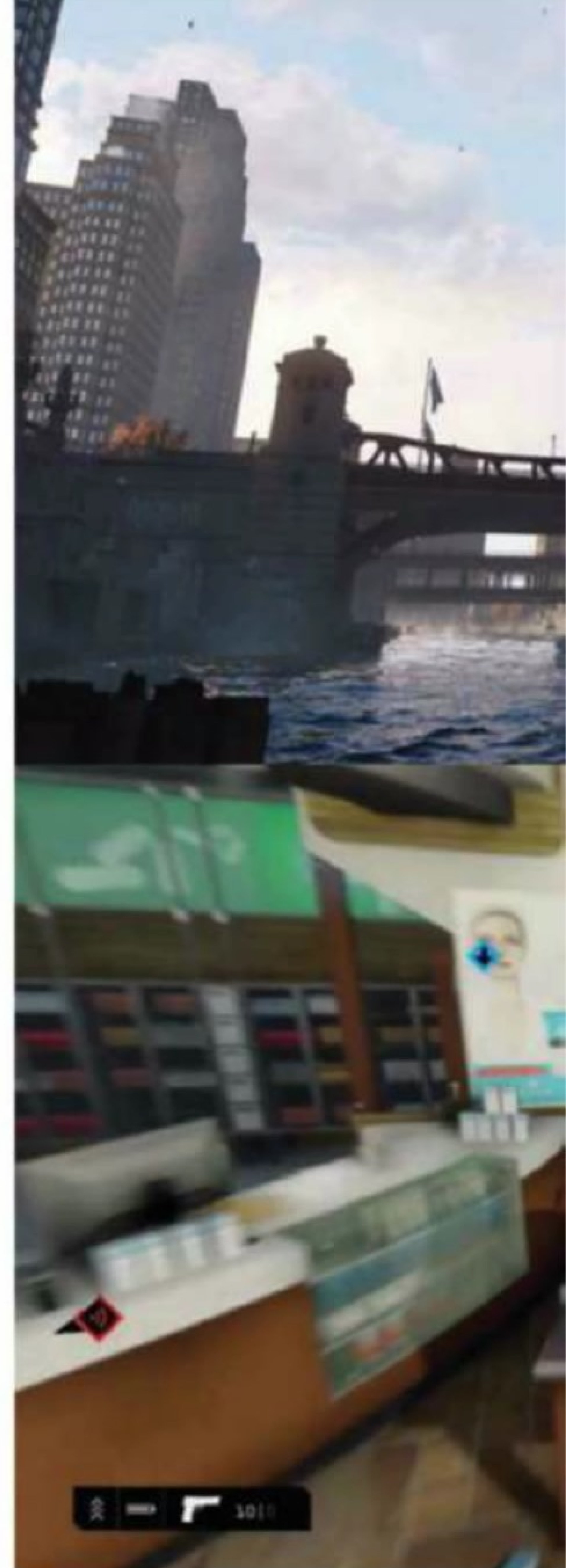
YOU'RE NOT ALONE

UBISOFT SNUCK in the first multiplayer footage during the PS4 trailer; as Aiden escapes via train we can see him fighting off an intrusion from another hacker. It isn't clear what multiplayer will entail just yet – whether it'll allow you to peer into friend's worlds or simply be competitive play. While Jonathan Morin can only tease, he's certainly selling the concept: "In *Watch Dogs* you are connected for real. If you think you are alone – think again. You're not. There's someone else out there watching you. Other players will cross your path. We are making a game about how hyper-connectivity impacts our society; if we don't explore the real-life aspect of this it would be completely missing the point. Expect to be able to play single player, multiplayer and everything in between."

> "The power of the PS4 allows the Watch Dogs team to further push the boundaries of what was previously thought possible"
>
> YVES GUILLEMOT UBISOFT



Above: Announced for PlayStation 4, the latest footage looks too good to be true. While it apparently is set to launch on both current and next-generation consoles, we see *Watch Dogs* struggling on Xbox 360 and PlayStation3. Right: While Ubisoft isn't dishing out any more details, *Watch Dogs* will also come with a companion smartphone app that will let players connect with friends and the city, even while away from the console.



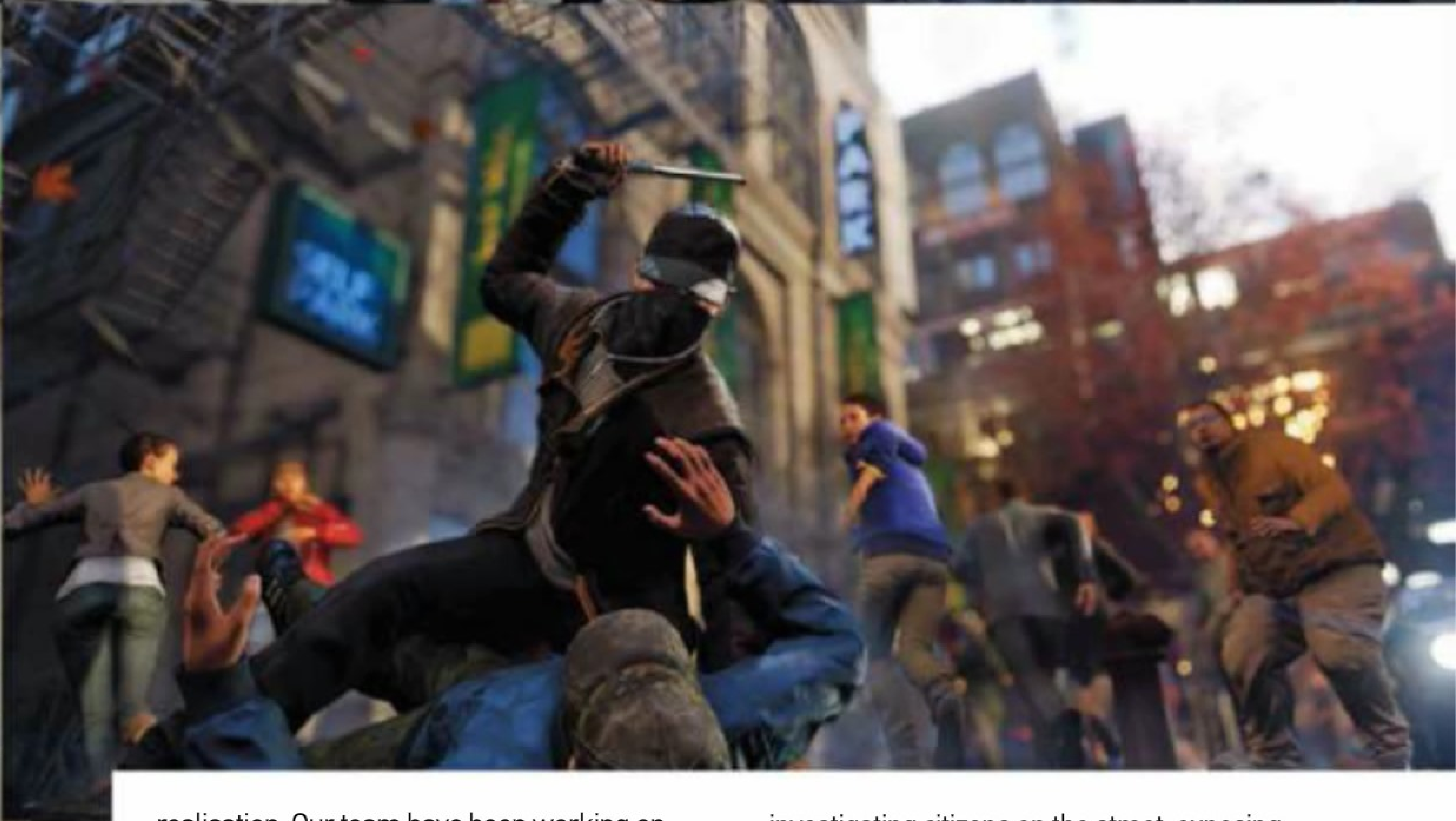
Above: We haven't seen much combat, though *Watch Dogs* seems to switch between fast-paced chases that end with nightstick punishment or street-level gunfights. The cover mechanics certainly look far more intuitive than that of *Grand Theft Auto*. Right: Set in an open world, players will be able to commandeer all the transport available in the city; trains can be halted via Aiden's smartphone, while he can still clamour into cars to make a quicker getaway if necessary. Presumably this extends to other forms of public transport, such as busses, taxis and maybe even planes.

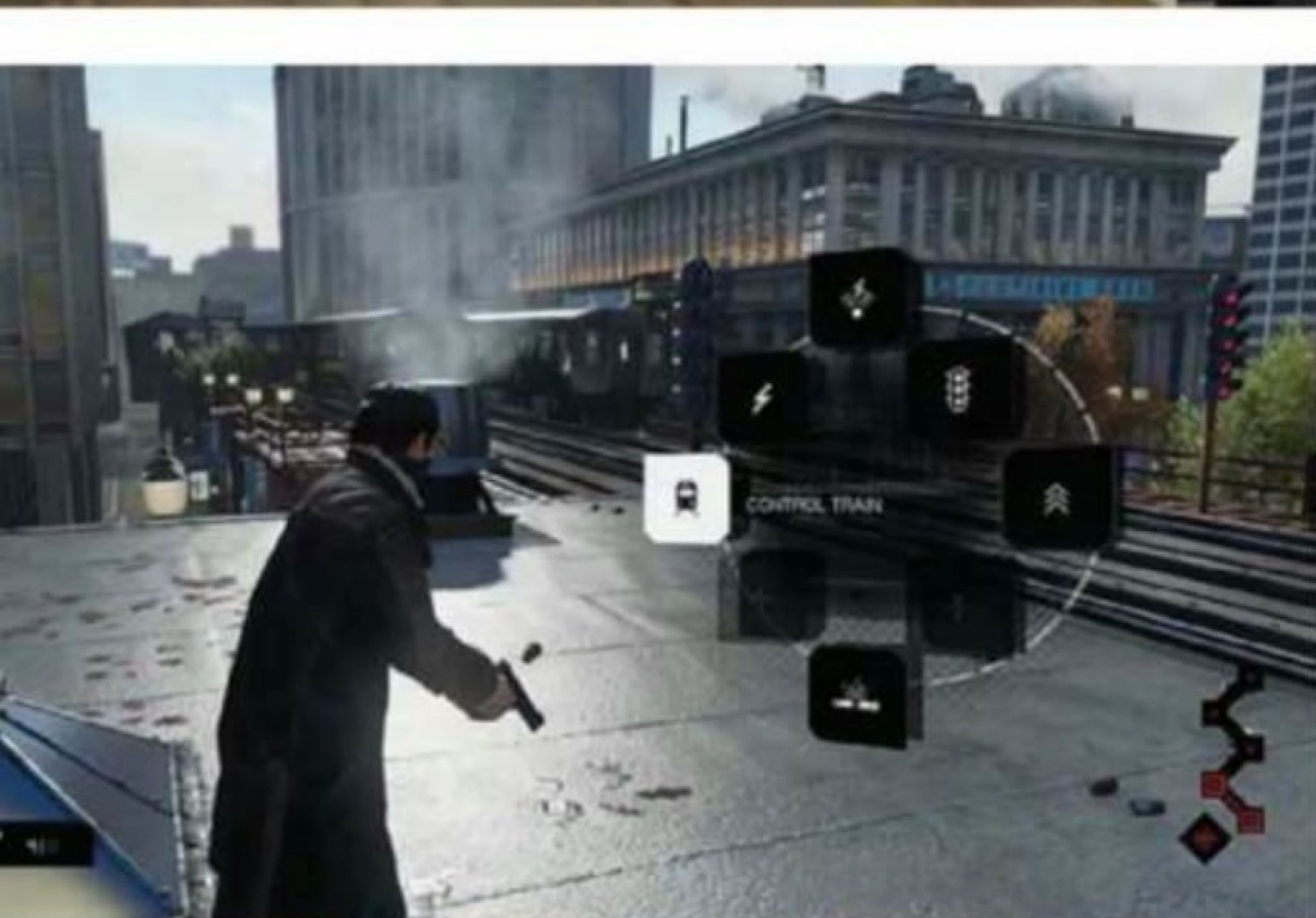














realisation. Our team have been working on this very complex ecosystem for more than four years now; this is what is required to build such an intricate set of AI systems.

"What the machine brings is new processing power and memory to run these things, but the biggest investment is always the time and the quality of the resources required to pull it off. So not only does the next generation bring more possibilities, but it also brings new challenges that we believe are extremely exciting from both a player's and a developer's perspective," asserts Morin, before detailing his vision for the future of gaming…

/// "For me, next generation is all about connectivity. I do love… all the power new machines have to offer. But in the end, players have seen [that] happen repeatedly in the past. The new exciting era now is how everyone remains connected; it is how multitasking is becoming a second nature in all of us. I am excited to see on how many levels this will impact our approach towards play and even business models… It is a very exciting time to be a game designer."

While all the talk has centred on Sony and the PlayStation 4, *Watch Dogs* is going to play across generations, with Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 and Wii U gamers all able to experience the fun. From the footage we've seen, it looks like the next gen will bring larger worlds, more dynamic AI and a seamless transition between investigating citizens on the street, exposing crime in the underbelly of Chicago and setting out on heart-stopping cityscape chases, before enacting some street justice with a retractable nightstick.

It all looks a little too good to be true, but Morin assures us that the footage shown publicly so far has all been running in real-time and that we should continue to expect bigger and better things going forward. E3 2013 is set to be one of the biggest in gaming history. Until we get a hands-on, we have genuine concerns about the truth to the claims, but we can't help but be overwhelmingly impressed.

"Both the E3 demo and the PS4 conference demo were played in real-time… The team have worked so hard and so long on this project," says Morin. "We always managed to get more and more excited about it even after all those years. But there's nothing more stimulating than to see that players out there share our enthusiasm about *Watch Dogs*.

"We feel privileged to have the trust of all those players and the only thing we all have in mind right now is to make sure we do not disappoint. We will push until the very last second to make sure that every single detail will make it into the box. We all know players want more out of their games and this is precisely what we want to give them. So keep watching us because we are certainly watching you back."



The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

CONCEPT ■ After two games lost in a cloud of amnesia, titular hero Geralt is finally in full control of his memories and in search of his lost love.

Five reasons to get excited about the first RPG of the next generation

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4
Origin: Poland
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: TD Projekt RED
Release: 2014
Players: 1

Developer Profile

CD Projekt expanded its operation in 2002, forming the RED studio that specialised in developing videogames. The studio's first release was *The Witcher*, based on the popular fantasy novels from Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski about a league of monster hunters whose bodies are supernaturally augmented to aid in their search of prey. *The Witcher* series has done exceptionally well for the developer, with the only other project on the cards being a revival of the *Cyberpunk* brand with *Cyberpunk 2077* pencilled in for a 2015 release date.

Developer History

The Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings
2011 [Multi]

The Witcher
2007 [PC]

High Point

The *Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings* had a wonderful world to dive into, though nothing quite beats your first encounter with the Kraken; after hours spent gearing up for the battle, the beast tears through you like tissue.

Time is catching up with Geralt Of Rivia. After two conquests, hundreds of accolades and over 5 million accumulated sales, he is tired of the turmoil in his homeland. He's tired of aimlessly hunting monsters, had enough of political spitting matches and is sick of the prejudice that follows him at every turn. That's why, for his final outing, Geralt is taking an opportunity to reclaim his past and make himself a future worth having. With his memory finally restored, Geralt sets out across The North in search of his long-lost love – the raven-haired priestess Yennefer – as an ancient evil spreads back across the land. *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* is set to be the next generation's first RPG for all leading platforms in 2014. A release on PC and PlayStation 4 has already been confirmed, though we expect it to find another platform once Microsoft shows its hand. We spoke with lead quest designer Mateusz Tomaszkiewicz and head of marketing Michal Platkow-Gilewski about the anticipated release.

1 THE FIRST NEXT-GEN RPG?

CD Projekt Red has only offered us a little hint of what to expect with *The Witcher 3*. The screenshots made available show the game through the studio's old renderer, so expect it to only look better as more of the next gen is unveiled. *The Witcher* is switching gears, taking its narrative-driven gameplay and exploding it into a huge open world. "For the first time, we are doing an open-world game," says Tomaszkiewicz. "It's a big challenge, of course, but it's really exciting for me because for the first time we can really feel how huge and rich the world of *The Witcher* is."

1




3


2

4


3

"Together with believable characters, a captivating tale and a world where players can roam freely without loading times, we will be able to move gaming to a new level"
ADAM BADOWSKI CD PROJEKT RED

2 FILLING AN OPEN WORLD

While *The Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings* was wildly ambitious, it struggled to escape its own linearity. With the sequel the studio needs to find a way to fill a map 30 times the size of its predecessors. "Of course, we need to think about how to fill this open world," says Platkow-Gilewski, adding, "If [players] enjoy monster hunting or enjoy doing over 50 hours of side-quests, they can do this. But with every step, they will know they are in the world where the main plot exists. The main plot its not one line of quests… it's something that is happening in the world, everywhere around *The Witcher.*"

3 WHO SAID THAT SIZE DOESN'T MATTER?

Offering a world 20 per cent larger than that of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, we've been told to expect a seamless experience without the distraction of loading times and arbitrary narrative crossroads such as chapter breakpoints. The world is so huge that CD Projekt RED estimates it will take 40 minutes to travel from one side to the other on horseback. Players shouldn't worry about getting lost; Platkow-Gilewski assures us they have it all in hand: "Our game is story focused, so although we will have a lot of side quests and random encounters, we will remind you with communities and dialogues which plot lines will be important."

4 THE HUNT IS ON

The *Witcher 3* is introducing dynamic monster hunting for the first time in the series. This will let players step into the shoes of Geralt as book author Andrzej Sapkowski intended. "I'm really excited as a developer by the monster hunting system. This is something we always tried to achieve in our games; the feeling that you actually are a Witcher," says Platkow-Gilewski, with Tomaszkiewicz adding: "You look for monsters through small villages or [through] people… By hunting we don't mean 'you go outside and kill all the monsters, collect some loot and then come back' – it's more connected with the lore of the given place."









Left: The variety of activities has been wildly increased. Not only can you watch and react to stand-up comedy, but KK Slider – everyone's favourite anthropomorphic musician – can be found at Club 444.

BEDKNOBS AND DREAM TOWNS

IT'S NOT all about being online with someone at the same time – you can also visit their town in your dreams. If you meet someone several times or you know them in real life, you can obtain their dream number. This lets you visit their town even when they're offline. Visit a special store in the city, get into a bed while an aardvark nurse watches and you, the bed and the nurse will be transported into a dream world where you can wander round that person's entire town, like *Bedknobs And Broomsticks* meets *Pokémon Black/White*'s Dream World. Because it's a dream, you won't affect anything, leaving you free to vandalise until you get bored.







Right: Much like previous iterations of *Animal Crossing*, *New Leaf* makes it fun to do chores and pay off a hefty mortgage. If you want to teach your kids (or irresponsible friends) the importance of responsibility, you can't go far wrong with a bit of *Animal Crossing* training.









Left: This is the first *Animal Crossing* game where players can be the mayor, building roads and decorating the entire town. It looks like a nice new distraction to keep players occupied.



Animal Crossing: New Leaf

CONCEPT Pick fruit, catch insects, talk to quirky humanoid animals and soak in the atmosphere of small-town life in a world that never sleeps.

Nintendo's town-tending sim returns on 3DS with online play and a mayoral twist

On the surface, *New Leaf* looks exactly like what's come before. But dig a little deeper, and the extensive overhaul *Animal Crossing* has been given for its 3DS debut becomes clear. From the extraordinarily deep customisation options to the online multiplayer minigames, the next instalment of town-tending is set to be the biggest and most robust yet.

Animal Crossing's appeal is simple: live in a town full of animals, pick fruit and plant flowers, generate Bells to upgrade your home and generally soak in the good life, with the time of day and day of the week in-game matching the real world.

Now, online multiplayer has been thrown into the mix, providing perhaps the biggest single addition the series has seen since its GameCube inception.

The mode sees your Mii-faced character team up with a group of friends on a tropical island setting (accessed by taking a boat together from your town) or matched up with random players across the world. The idea is to beat minigames in order to get rewarded with medals to spend in the island's store on exclusive items for your town.

But it's in the confines of your town that you'll be spending the most time, and it's safe to say that town life has been given some enormous overhauls, too. Old-timer Tortimer has shuffled off into retirement, putting you in the mayor's shoes. This means you're in charge of the entire town's design, not just your house, and can kick-start new projects from the town hall – anything from a new bench or streetlight, right up to fountains, statues and bridges.

/// We use the term kick-start because these 'public projects' are crowd-sourced. Start one, choose its location and a building site pops up, with a Gyroid asking animals to donate Bells to get it off the ground; a Kickstarter for town furniture. Of course, you can pay for it all using your own funds, or you can go round the town pillorying your fellow folk into coughing up.

It's not just the town that has seen an overhaul, but the city, too. *Animal Crossing: City Folk* on Wii introduced the big-city concept to the series, although its execution fell flat. Here, the idea is fleshed out with a spate of different shops – everything from a nightclub and supermarket to a much larger museum complete with gift shop.

> "We've packed so much content into New Leaf that it's really like we've built on all the best bits of the previous games"
>
> KATSUYA EGUCHI PRODUCER

The museum actually serves more purpose beyond browsing and buying; you can now set up your own exhibits of items, complete with handmade posters displayed in the lobby, drawn using the touchscreen. Want to show off every wiggling, gyrating Gyroid you've ever dug up? Here's the place to do it.

New items? The megaphone allows you to shout the name of an animal character across the map using the 3DS's microphone in order to find them quickly, while a wetsuit lets you swim and dive into the sea. Even returning features have been revamped. Customisation runs deeper than it did on DS or Wii, with the touchscreen able to be zoomed in and the full gamut of available colour shades selectable (not just a small group of preset hues). These more detailed designs can then be slapped onto almost any furniture: bedspreads, shelves, carpets, wallpaper, tables and chairs. Mixing and matching different designs is not only possible, but encouraged. You can even take these designs and create a QR code for them.

Streetpass also offers extra depth. Every time you pass someone in the street with *New Leaf*, their house will be added to a block of homes saved on the Home Showcase. This is a place where you can visit and inspect every home of every single player you meet, as well as talk to their accompanying resident and receive gifts.

Looking at still screenshots, *New Leaf* looks like old hat. But there's enough new content here to justify a New Forest. We're looking forward to taking over the world, one cashed-in turnip at a time.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house
Release: 21 June (Japan: out now)
Genre: Strategy
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Nintendo's anthropomorphic animal town has a longer history than you might think, having started life as a Japan-only affair on the Nintendo 64. Nintendo's internal teams have worked on four iterations of the game across five consoles, making it one of the most important series in their stable.

Developer History

Animal Crossing: City Folk **2008 [Wii]**

Animal Crossing: Wild World **2005 [DS]**

Animal Crossing **2002 [GameCube]**

Animal Crossing **2001 [N64]**

High Point

The jump to handheld with DS is easily the best thing to happen to the series; the take-anywhere approach fits the time-based gameplay to a tee, making a 3DS sequel doubly exciting.

■ Below: We've seen a couple of kinds of Zin so far: foot troopers, the skinny armoured guy at the back of this screenshot, and massive brawler-types called Wardens. We're assured that the flexible biology of the aliens has given Volition lots to play with in terms of enemy type.

WHAT HAPPENED TO ENTER THE DOMINATRIX?

SAINTS ROW: The Third benefited from a healthy supply of DLC. For a title with the emphasis on fun over logic, it remained a way to sneak stranger ideas in under the radar. Enter The Dominatrix was the largest proposed pack, featuring much of what is now *Saints Row IV*; at some point during development, it became clear that there was enough there to pin around an entirely separate title.

While aliens and superpowers are fine fare for a bit of wacky downloadable content, it remains to be seem whether Volition can sustain the pace for a full game. Still, there's a director's cut edition of Enter The Dominatrix planned to follow the release of *Saints Row IV*, containing the things that missed the final cut. Considering what stayed in, it's hard to imagine what it'll contain.





■ Right: Giant floating sky-cities are standard accommodation for the invading Zin forces; luckily, as you've been granted superpowers, getting up there and giving them hell shouldn't be too much of a problem.









Saints Row IV

CONCEPT ■ Wacky toy-driven sandbox play tangentially related to the original concept of taking over a city through the medium of organised crime; like *GTA* after too much Vimto.

Become President, save the world from aliens, kill people with dubstep. Standard

Here's the most telling thing you need to know about *Saints Row IV*: it contains a dubstep gun. A gun that shoots raw dubstep at your enemies. A gun that makes everyone around the player character dance uncontrollably when it is fired. A gun that disintegrates cars. A gun that shoots pure videogame cliché, one year too late.

Saints Row IV is a spoiled child of a game. It is clearly not used to hearing the word 'no'. It somehow makes the almost uncomfortably outrageous *Saints Row: The Third* look mundane, which is an achievement considering that game's signature item was a five-foot weaponised rubber phallus, and it involved a mission where you must transport an unrestrained tiger in an open-topped sports car while being rammed off the road by animal rights protestors.

Published by Deep Silver after the untimely demise of THQ, it follows the same shallow but ultimately satisfying ethos of the previous title: fun trumps all. For example, one of the weapons is a head-inflation ray that causes the bodies and heads and eyes of targets to swell up and burst in a hilarious fashion, because someone thought that would be a good idea.

Here is the plot: you, the main character, are the President of the United States. The previous President was captured by aliens and you must rescue them. We are not making this up. The engine is unchanged and the UI remains functionally identical to its prequel; the developers have made a conscious effort to fill the game with a series of ridiculous toys rather than focus on upping the technological value of the game. A further example: the protagonist drives, as standard, a cross between a pimpmobile and a monster truck, which presumably must have been originally used for transporting unusually tall prostitutes.

///The first we see of the Zin – the President-napping extra-terrestrials – is the bodies of police officers transforming into their unnatural alien forms during a gunfight. They've also built giant floating strongholds throughout the sky, and employed powerful alien monsters to beat you up if you get cocky. Unlike the previous titles where the city has been under the influence of three gangs that you can tackle in any order you wish, *Saints Row IV* is a presidential battle against the wide variety of aliens under the banners of the Zin.

Sometimes, if you squint, you can remember that this used to be a series about the dangerous world of organised crime. Somewhere the creative leads looked at the project and thought that the gritty storyline was jarring a little with the missions where you shoot poo on people's houses, so they cut the storyline and doubled the poo.

Much of the game takes place in a virtual version of Steelport, because that cuts any strings connected to reality that remain clinging to the novelty helium balloon that is *Saints Row*'s logic. The virtual world allows the main character to earn superpowers – things like super-speed, flight, super-strength, telekinesis, ice blasts, punchable shockwaves, hyper-wrestling – because, you know, why not? *Why the hell not?* You spent the entire previous game playing what amounted to a supervillain, after all.

In the five-minute demonstration we're shown ten minutes' worth of features, spat out at a tremendous rate, and it's impossible to write down one without missing another while you do it. You can customise your rocket launcher to resemble a guitar case. All of your punches are replaced with extravagant wrestling moves. You can dress up like Uncle Sam. There is a flying mech suit you can take out on rampages, and if you destroy enough property and kill enough human beings with the mounted machine guns, it does a little dance for you.

All the switches are turned on; all the dials are turned to full. Restraint is long forgotten. This is a mad, sugar rush of a thing. *Saints Row IV* is drunk and should go home before it embarrasses itself any further.

> "Our franchise design mentality has become: 'Embrace the crazy, fun trumps all"
>
> SCOTT PHILLIPS, VOLITION

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, PC, PlayStation 3
Origin: US
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: Volition
Release: 23 August (US: Aug 20)
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Volition Inc is an Illinois-based developer formed out of Parallax Software's 1996 split. Acquired by THQ in 2000, it developed the publisher's flagship action games. Following THQ's bankruptcy in early 2013, it has since been taken over by German publishers Koch Media, who is managing the release of Volition's games under their Deep Silver label.

Developer History

Saints Row: The Third **2011 [Multi]**

Red Faction: Armageddon **2011 [Multi]**

Red Faction: Guerrilla **2009 [Multi]**

Saints Row 2 **2008 [Multi]**

High Point

2008's *Saints Row 2* blended transgressive, balls-out action and a powerful storyline to make a *Grand Theft Auto* clone that outperformed its template on almost every level.

"We really don't skimp on set pieces. We blow up giant cruisers, we have flight sections – there are all sorts of big moments"

PIERS JACKSON GUERRILLA CAMBRIDGE



■ Above: Despite being the first *Killzone* game to be developed outside of Guerrilla Games directly, it certainly looks like Guerrilla Cambridge have everything in hand.

Killzone: Mercenary

CONCEPT ■ The power of the PS3 packed into Sony's cutting-edge handheld, in the form of the genre its twin sticks have been begging for: a full-fledged FPS.

Promising the full Killzone experience on the go, with added innovation to boot

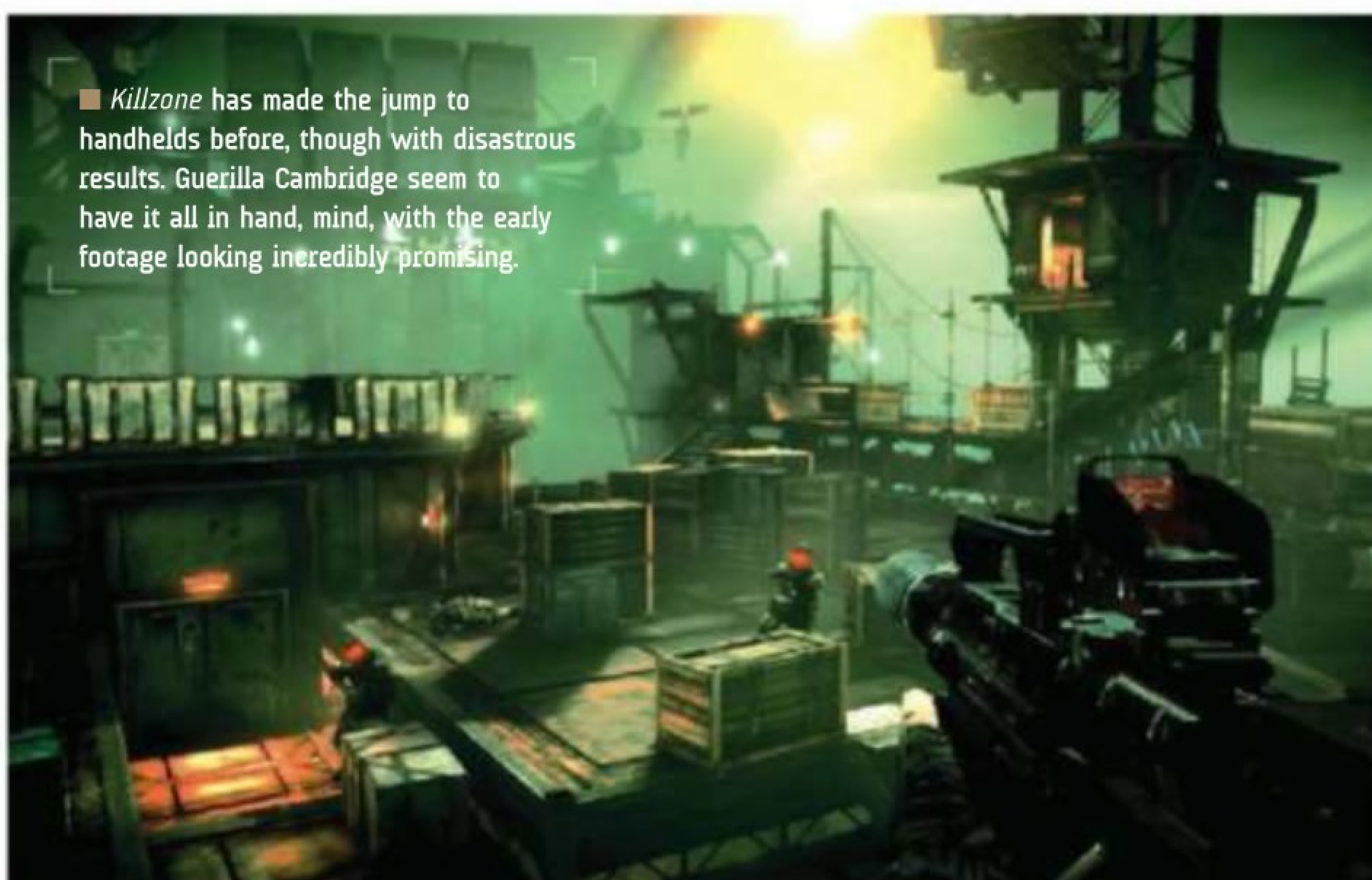
"Come at me, bro." That's what *Killzone*'s official Twitter feed told *GTA V* developers Rockstar when they realised the two games will release one day apart. Silly, perhaps, but it's proof of Guerilla Cambridge's lofty ambitions for PS Vita's own *Killzone*. *Mercenary* fears no game.

PS Vita's exclusive FPS is as ambitious as any home console title, a full-scale shooter experience running on Sony's powerhouse handheld without compromise. Much like PS4's *Shadow Fall*, *Mercenary* is a technical showcase for PS Vita, proving the extent of the power that lies beneath. It's not just about power, though. In fact, *Killzone: Mercenary* could be the single most important release on PS Vita, full stop. The reason? *Call Of Duty*. The Vita exclusive *Black Ops: Declassified* was an appalling failure, an exercise in wasted potential that showed exactly how *not* to put a franchise on handheld, boiling the 'campaign' down into dull, low-rent three-minute missions.

Killzone won't make the same mistake. From exploding ships in the sky to turrets, airships, a litany of guns and some awesome stealth kill options, *Mercenary* is packing a full-fat single-player experience to sink your twin sticks into. It's not just the analogues, but also the touchscreen that promises to be put to good effect. Using the screen, players will be able to stab enemies in the back without being spotted. Don't fancy sneaking about? Run up to an enemy and ram a ruddy great knife in his neck instead for a front-facing melee kill while they stare at you in agonised surprise. An arm-mounted panel for the player character is also sure to come in handy; we've already seen it being used to uncloak a flying gunship and control an overhead drone attack – sure to be the tip of the adversarial iceberg.

The title has several game modes. Finish the campaign once and you'll be able to run through again in covert, demolition or precision mode – the first being about stealth, the second guns blazing and the last accuracy. Because you'll have a fully customisable weapon loadout, you'll be able to tailor the guns you take to the way you've opted to play. The game's story seems to revolve around conflict as a money-making exercise, with the words, "Buy guns, buy the best. War is our business," suggesting both an expandable weapon set (using in-game currency, not just DLC), and a campaign touching on the big business of making weapons.

But about that power. It *does* look insanely good. Somehow, Guerrilla has managed to take the engine which powers *Killzone 3* on PS3 and forced it to fit into PS Vita – even leaving room to make some exclusive alterations for the high-tech handheld, taking the home console engine and modifying it for on-the-go. It all adds up to a title set to prove Vita's worth, as a handheld game and as a concept – a glorious statement of intent not just to the core games industry, but a 'come at me, bro' moment to smartphone and tablet titles, too.



■ *Killzone* has made the jump to handhelds before, though with disastrous results. Guerilla Cambridge seem to have it all in hand, mind, with the early footage looking incredibly promising.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS Vita
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Guerrilla Cambridge
Release: 17 September
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Formerly Sony Cambridge, Guerrilla's second arm has long been at the forefront of handheld development, having created the iconic platforming series *Medievil* back on PS1 – pushing it onto PSP in 2005 – as well as helming *LittleBigPlanet* for Sony's first handheld. Now, they're taking Sony's cutting-edge shooter and putting it onto portable.

Developer History

TV Superstars **2010 [PS3]**
LittleBigPlanet **2009 [PSP]**
24: The Game **2006 [PS2]**
Medievil: Resurrection **2005 [PSP]**

High Point

Creating *Medievil*, a series long remembered by fans for its charming platform gameplay back on the original PlayStation, before re-imagining it as a PSP launch game.



Right: Mario can utilise Luigi's newfound confidence in the dream world, summoning multiple Luigis to aid in battle and platforming. This includes building a tower of Luigis, allowing Mario to ride through sections of tough enemies.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house
Release: 2013
Players: 1-TBA

Luigi's Profile

Introduced in the 1983 arcade cabinet edition of *Mario Bros* alongside his esteemed older brother, Luigi has evolved over the years to become quite the character in his own right. His first full solo outing, *Luigi's Mansion*, was a big success on the GameCube, spawning its own 3DS sequel due out later this year. Shigeru Miyamoto must be proud.

Developer History

Luigi's Mansion
2002 [GC]
Mario Is Missing
1993 [SNES]
Super Mario World
1990 [SNES]
Mario Bros
1983 [NES]

High Point

Strapping on a vacuum, putting fear behind you and busting some ghosts in a haunted house – *Luigi's Mansion* couldn't have got it any more right.

Mario & Luigi: Dream Team

CONCEPT Mario and Luigi return for another RPG adventure, this time in the surreal prison of Luigi's dreams.

We're off to never-never land

It has been 30 years since Mario's cowardly brother made his pixellated debut in *Mario Bros*, and Nintendo is celebrating the anniversary by making 2013 the official Year Of Luigi. The company's latest Nintendo Direct presentation revealed a handful of new projects, including Luigi-focused DLC for *New Super Mario Bros U* and a release date for *Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon*, though it's the upcoming *Mario & Luigi: Dream Team* that has us reaching for those green overalls in barely contained excitement.

Coming exclusively to 3DS later this year, *Mario & Luigi: Dream Team* is taking the brothers on an unlikely adventure inside Luigi's dreams. Utilising the dual screens, players can take control of Mario on the top screen while using a sleeping Luigi on the bottom screen to solve puzzles.

The *Mario & Luigi* RPG series has been a popular addition to Nintendo's handheld line-up since *Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga* was released back in 2003, and while fan favour has wavered a little since *Partners In Time* and *Bowser's Inside Story*, there's no doubt that the duo's RPG debut on the 3DS will have the sprinkling of innovative magic that we've come to expect from a Nintendo first-party title.

Luigi tends to get a bad rap, but we'd have problems developing confidence too if our older, shorter brother continued to get the girl, and all we inherited was spooky mansions and old men with vacuums. Besides, at night Luigi can be the hero he's always dreamed of being, letting him assist Mario on what looks like their most dangerous adventure yet.

As the duo run around the beautiful environments, Luigi can crash out on mattresses, opening up warp gates for Mario to dive into, transporting him to a surreal dreamscape. It's here that the player can then poke and prod sleeping Luigi on the bottom screen to influence the level design and solve puzzles. If Mario is presented with an impossible chasm to cross, the player can tickle Luigi's nose in the real world that will in turn cause him to sneeze, blowing blocks into Mario's path to get across.

> "Later this year, Mario & Luigi: Dream Team is taking the bros on an unlikely adventure inside Luigi's dreams"

The combat system has also had an overhaul, with players able to multiply and flood enemies with waves of Luigis in battle. We also got a further sneak peek at the 2D platforming sections, where Mario can summon and ride a tower of Luigis through a tough section of enemies. The isometric overworld looks beautiful, and we can only imagine how great they will look with the 3D slider cranked to maximum.

Nintendo is aiming *Mario & Luigi: Dream Team* at a summer 2013 release, and despite this being the first we've heard of it, it's looking fantastic. The 3DS line-up continues to get stronger and stronger.



Above: While Luigi slumbers on the bottom screen, his ghostly face hangs above Mario in the dream world. Messing with him while he's asleep affects the environment for Mario.

Metro: Last Light

CONCEPT Survival-horror sequel set in the depths of a post-apocalyptic Moscow subway network, battling supernatural threats with a variety of improvised weaponry.

As Last Light approaches its final destination, we chat to the men behind the horror

The game doesn't continue the story from the source novel, instead writer Dmitry Glukhovsky has crafted a new tale that'll further expand the Metro mythology.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, PS3, PC
Origin: Ukraine
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: 4A Games
Release: May 17 (US: May 13)
Players: 1

Developer Profile

4A Games is a rarity in the top-budget game world, as it's situated in the Ukraine; it's founded by ex-employees of GSC Game World, developers of rival Ukrainian atomic horror game S.T.A.L.K.E.R.. Operating free from the design philosophies of more Western developers – and receiving a light touch from previous publishers THQ and new owners Deep Silver – it has worked to create something unusual and fascinating.

Developer History

Metro 2033
2010 [Xbox 360/PC]

High Point

Metro 2033 was an underappreciated rough gem that's only now gaining recognition, combining strong storytelling techniques with an unusually harsh environment and steep difficulty curve. Last Light looks to combine some needed technical polish with their Eastern methods, and create something suited to a larger audience.

Things haven't got much better for Artyom, star of Metro 2033. He's still being funnelled between grimy underground stations, fighting against mutant beasts and the threat of radiation from the surface, and caught in tangled webs of communist and neo-Nazi plots.

Taking the same gameplay pattern as the previous title, Last Light is a mix of directed story sections in friendly metro stations and plenty of fighting in open, flexible playgrounds between them. The option of taking your own route through a section in a first-person shooter makes a refreshing change of pace from the standard fare, and coupling this with the legendary fragility of Artyom makes almost every fight a close-fought thing.

After playing around an hour of the game – in which we sneaked through a shadowy Communist train yard, piloted a car covered in lightbulbs to scare away fire scorpions, fled wolf-beasts on the surface world and saw our first post-apocalyptic chorus line, complete with unsettling jiggle physics – we sat down and talked with Huw Benyon (global brand manager) and Dmitry Glukhovsky (lead writer) to see if we could shed some light on the game.

Firstly, let's talk about the transfer from THQ to Deep Silver. What's happened there? What sort of challenges has that posed?

HUW: You know, well, it's disruptive; it's a pain in the arse. There's lots of really boring paperwork that you have to go through when a developer picks up with a new publisher. From my own personal perspective, I was a THQ employee, so for a while I was wondering how I was going to feed myself. You know, little things like that.

Overall, I'd say everyone's happy with the outcome. It's been a little bit… traumatic at times, but ultimately, we're here, we're back, we're really happy with the state of the game, we're careening towards our release date, and it's not impacted on the quality of the title at all.

Last Light is an entirely new story, not an adaptation of a novel like Metro 2033 was. How have you approached writing it?

"What has a bigger value than such a real thing as a bullet? A bullet can cost your life, or the life of someone else"
DMITRY GLUKHOVSKY AUTHOR OF THE METRO NOVELS

DMITRY: The kind of story you're going to find here is quite rare for any game. I've tried to make it as serious as a serious movie would be, or an HBO drama would be, you know? These are the levels of dramatic and storytelling standards that I'm looking up to.

I didn't want to look down on or talk down to gamers. I didn't want to imagine them as stupid teenagers who just need to have action. Because – first of all – if you try to make something primitive, if you're not yourself enjoying the things that you're doing, if you're just manufacturing instead of creating, if you're imagining what your target audience would like… then you're not giving birth to a child, but you're making a golem that would not ever breathe or walk.

It seems there's more of a political bias with Last Light, as opposed to 2033's supernatural slant. Is that right?

DMITRY: Well, in 2033, when I was writing it, I just put in anything I had passion for. Like, Latin American magical realism, and Borgesian and Cartesarian styles, and that explains all the mystical things. And also, all of my thoughts on religion, ideologies, philosophies – it was me growing up through this character, and it took almost ten years from starting from scratch to completing it. It's very motley. It has everything in it, including the supernatural.

Last Light has some remnants of the supernatural in it, but it's also way more realistic and psychological. Whatever I decided not to fill with the mystical, I filled with human souls. Human characters. I tried to make them as believable and realistic as I could.

Divergent paths aren't something you see very often in games released at this scale, but much of the combat in Metro seems to take place in open 'playground' areas linked by corridors.

HUW: I'd never accuse Metro of being a sandbox game, or an open-ended game, or anything like that. We have plenty of linear aspects as well, and some scripted moments. But we have a combination of both scripted and emergent gameplay styles that you don't see very often, and that's something that we're really proud of because the mechanics – where you can experiment with the world and the physics and the lighting – all feel really robust. You feel like you could have a shooter based just on those systems, you know, but we feel that we can give the narrative and the story stuff as well. It's that combination and that variety that are really important to Metro.

We noticed that there are more conversations written and voiced than you could hear in a single playthrough. Why did you choose to do this?

DMITRY: I wanted to create dozens, if not hundreds, of side stories to give you an absolute impression that this is a real world. And they're not just mumbling away; if you stop and listen, there are little girls who are complaining that their mothers are dying of cancer. And if you watch the trailer, you'll see they execute each other because of racial prejudice, because they don't think alike, or whatever. You get the same level of graphic content that you get from watching CNN from Rwanda. I wanted to make sure that this is not a regular game.



■ **games™** visited the 4A Games studio at the end of 2012. A modest outfit in the heart of Ukraine, it surprised us to see such a small team produce a game of such quality.

SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN

METRO: LAST Light occupies a strange hinterland between action and stealth, as it purposely doesn't give the player enough tools to make either an easy option. Fights are tricky and it's easy to get surrounded and outgunned by enemies, and stealth seems to balance on a constant knife-edge of discovery. It's tense stuff, no matter how you choose to play it, underlined by the fact that you're constantly going through resources at a worrying rate – resources like bullets, grenades, health, money, air, that sort of thing. Does it work, though? Luckily, yes. The difficulty curve is still harsh, but improved UI, weapon feel and enemy scripting mean that you're in with a better chance of improvising your way through to a solution than you ever were before.

■ The switch in publisher has not had a major impact with development, with the studio just putting the finishing touches on the gloomy underground shooter.





Above: Exploring gardens has never been so enthralling. *Pikmin*'s debut in high-definition is everything we imagined it would be. Below: Miyamoto is aiming to make this the most challenging *Pikmin* game yet, increasing the difficulty and variety of enemies and puzzles.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house
Release: Spring 2013
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Creator of *Mario*, *Zelda*, Wii and DS, Shigeru Miyamoto is the most influential games developer in the history of the industry, hands down. Having gotten the idea for *Pikmin* from watching ants in his back garden, Miyamoto has now turned his attention to a third entry.

Developer History

New Play Control! Pikmin 2 **2009 [Wii]**

New Play Control! Pikmin **2009 [Wii]**

Pikmin 2 **2004 [GameCube]**

Pikmin **2002 [GameCube]**

High Point

In a career of highs, anything from *Mario* and *Zelda* to masterminding Nintendo's new casual-led direction with Wii and DS (with blockbuster sales) could be seen as the career summit.

Pikmin 3

CONCEPT A strategy game about a space captain and his army of flowers.

A bounty of colourful little critters are set to inject new life into Wii U

Wii U is doomed, dying at retail thanks to a dearth of games and a marketing failure, leaving even Nintendo fans confused as to what the console is. Well, that's if you take internet chatter as gospel. The truth? Wii U needs a great exclusive that takes advantage of most of the console's main features.

Here it is. Six years in the making (it was originally a Wii game), *Pikmin 3* is set to make perfect use of the Wii U's new capabilities.

Nintendo's newest 'core IP' sees players take control of one of four captains (not including Olimar, for some unknown reason) and an army of the titular *Pikmin* – creatures that have to be managed in order to clear environment-based obstacles throughout the course of the game in real-time, as the game needs to be cleared in a certain time in order to succeed. *Pikmin 3* will overhaul the series' mechanics, bringing them firmly into 2013. Rather than chucking critters at targets, players have to analyse each battle and decide how to bring down an enemy, with some reacting differently to being hit in certain areas, like their eyes. The title also introduces at least two new *Pikmin*: a heavy rock creature and a





pink, flying one. The former can be thrown at glass or heavy enemies to smash things apart more easily, but are slow and vulnerable to surprise attacks. The latter are yet to be shown off, but have been spotted several times, so we can expect a new twist to the gameplay mechanics using these airborne beasts.

Though many are unfamiliar with the series that last had a new instalment on GameCube in 2004, *Pikmin 3* should be marked on every Nintendo fan's calendar as the first title worth buying a Wii U for in its own right. Legendary *Mario* and *Zelda* creator, and lead *Pikmin 3* developer, Shigeru Miyamoto has confirmed the title will be playable entirely on the console's six-inch GamePad screen – meaning the strategy action never has to be stopped, even if you have to relinquish the telly.

/// The title also makes great use of the console's HD capabilities. Where other games have used HD as an excuse to make 'gritty' brown/grey worlds, *Pikmin 3* looks almost photorealistic, its sprawling forest floors covered in insanely detailed bump-mapped textures, dandelions blooming in gorgeous yellow and blades of grass shining in vibrant green. Water looks deep, reflecting and behaving like water should – not just a bluish gunk, but an always-moving liquid mass.

It looks absolutely lovely, and is the first title that will prove Wii U is more powerful than the ageing PS3 and Xbox 360 architecture preceding it. However, according to reports, the developers have yet to decide on which control scheme to make the default: Wii Remote and Nunchuk or GamePad and stylus. Considering how well *Pikmin* and *Pikmin 2* played on the Wii with reworked *New Play Control!* schemes, using motion should be an intensely enjoyable experience; but given the current lack of compelling reasons to pick up a GamePad-toting Wii U, it'd be mad for Nintendo not to wax lyrical to all and sundry about how controlling the RTS action will be made easier with screen and stylus.

It may look cute and shiny, but rest assured that Miyamoto is going to be ramping up the difficulty, ensuring more experienced gamers get a kick out of Nintendo's biggest first-party release this side of E3. Miyamoto has gone on record to say he wants to increase the 'stress level' of the third game, making sure players feel on edge.

In a spring quarter only really notable for *Lego City: Undercover* and the absence of *Rayman*, Nintendo has a real chance with *Pikmin 3* to create a game to show off its newest console's best features, grab the attention of the masses and please the long-time fans all at once. With the way the title's looking, there's no doubt the third *Pikmin* has the potential to achieve all three.



> "The TV and Wii U GamePad will let you see what you are doing at any time, which is a great evolution for a strategy game"
>
> **SHIGERU MIYAMOTO NINTENDO**

■ Below: While Olimar is missing from the starting line-up of gardening captains, Miyamoto has been teasing his involvement since E3 2012.



THE CONTROL OPTIONS EXPLAINED

WII U HAS more potential control inputs than any console before it; from the Wii Remote and Nunchuk, to Motion Plus, Pro Controller and GamePad (complete with its own motion), there are so many ways to take control of Wii U's games – but few titles have made use of anything other than the GamePad.

Pikmin 3 will change all that. Motion controls, perfected in *New Play Control!* rereleases of *Pikmin* and *Pikmin 2*, show how the Wii Remote can be used to pinpoint critters, fling *Pikmin* at enemies, organise armies and traverse the environment. But Wii U's GamePad can also be used to drag *Pikmin* and pan around the overworld.





■ Left: It's perhaps a little easy to be negative about *Pikmin 3*. While it certainly looks entertaining, we can't help but wish Nintendo was being more inventive with the property and the console's unique technology.

While you can freely move the camera if you want to, *Brothers* has a dynamic system in place that lets Starbreeze direct the flow of the story. It's a beautiful world and rather glorious to travel through.





DON'T MENTION TIME...

THE LENGTH OF downloadable games has always been a point of contention. Starbreeze has already confirmed the game will run from four to five hours – not that such a thing concerns Farez: "The length of a game is totally not interesting to me. I don't care about it at all. A great game could be ten hours, but it rarely is. It's like if you go see a movie or hear a song – you don't care. You care about the experience; that's the important thing. It depends on how you value your time. For me, if I have three great hours then that's value for my time – instead of ten hours of replaying the same shit. It's the experiences that are important."

Above: You'll have to work your brothers in unison if you want to make it through the world. One brother can distract incoming threats while the other moves elegantly to safety. Right: While one brother will assist citizens – sweep their paths and rock them to sleep – the other is far happier to just cause chaos.





Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons

CONCEPT ■ Starbreeze ditch the guns for a slightly more considered puzzler from the mind of Josef Fares.

The indie darling of 2013

At its heart, *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons* is a recognisable tale. A father clings to life, and his two sons – desperate to cure him of his ailments – set out on a journey to recover 'The Water Of Life'. A story of the Holy Grail if there ever was one, but it's one that has taken Swedish filmmaker Josef Fares much of the last three years to create.

"I've always had this passion and love for games, and this is a dream come true for me," says the *Jalla! Jalla!* director, clearly very passionate about the project. "I pretty much paused my career just to do this. I make much less money, but I don't care about that. Right now, I'm working for free just to get this out. I really believe in it."

On the surface, *Brothers* looks like a strange fit for Starbreeze Studios – known for *The Darkness* and *Riddick* games – though after the disappointing critical and commercial reception that faced *Syndicate*, it is no surprise the studio is looking for its own unique new project to pitch to the alternative gaming market.

Fares, along with a small team of 30, is looking to push past the expectations of a downloadable experience and deliver a title quite unlike anything else in the space. After the success of *Journey*, that's sure to be no easy task – though our first look at *Brothers* and its innovative gameplay mechanics instils a lot of faith.

"I think less is more," muses Fares. "The simplicity of the game was extremely important. Part of that was to scale away the dialogue and make it so that the player has his or her own experience, and whatever kind of journey they want."

That simplicity comes in the form of *Brothers*' unique mechanics, with each brother mapped to an analogue stick and their respective action buttons to a trigger. This allows each brother to move independently and simultaneously, an essential feature for the game with puzzling at its core.

/// The brothers act uniquely, and their action buttons become context-sensitive in nature. The older brother exhibits a caring, more mindful presence, while the younger brother is fairly oblivious to the world around him – causing mischief and pranking citizens. It's little qualities like this that brings a quiet nuance to *Brothers*. A co-operative game in theory, then, engineered as a distinct single-player experience.

The camera is handled dynamically and you are left to investigating the landscapes of the world and interacting with its residents. It's designed so that every puzzle and every citizen behaves differently to the one before it. It's an ambitious task for the studio renowned for shooters and gore over quietly considered mental exercises.

"I didn't have a clue how hard it is to make games; now I really respect game creators because it's so insane, the amount of work! Especially if you want to make a game like this where you have to have so much variation, so much different stuff all the time," says Fares on the difficulties of development, noting, "People in my team maybe thought I was a little bit crazy, because it costs a lot of money to make everything unique."

For Fares there was never any question in his mind as to whether he should pursue a career in the videogame industry. While launching a new IP is risky business (it's the first Starbreeze has launched one in over a decade), Fares isn't concerned. In his mind, the ambition on this project is enough to see it through to success. "I never hesitate when I believe in something. I truly believe in this. I'm so confident in what we're doing here," he assures us. "And if you look at the whole game and you play it through you will see what I mean."

> "I knew I wanted to combine the deep, engrossing storyline of a film with the physical experience of a videogame"
>
> JOSEF FARES STARBREEZE STUDIOS

Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons is due for release later this year, and it's certainly looking like one to watch. While it doesn't have the blazing attributes of a typical Starbreeze IP, it looks like a thoughtful top-down adventure game that's simply brimming with character and charm.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: Sweden
Publisher: 505 Games
Developer: Starbreeze Studios
Release: 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

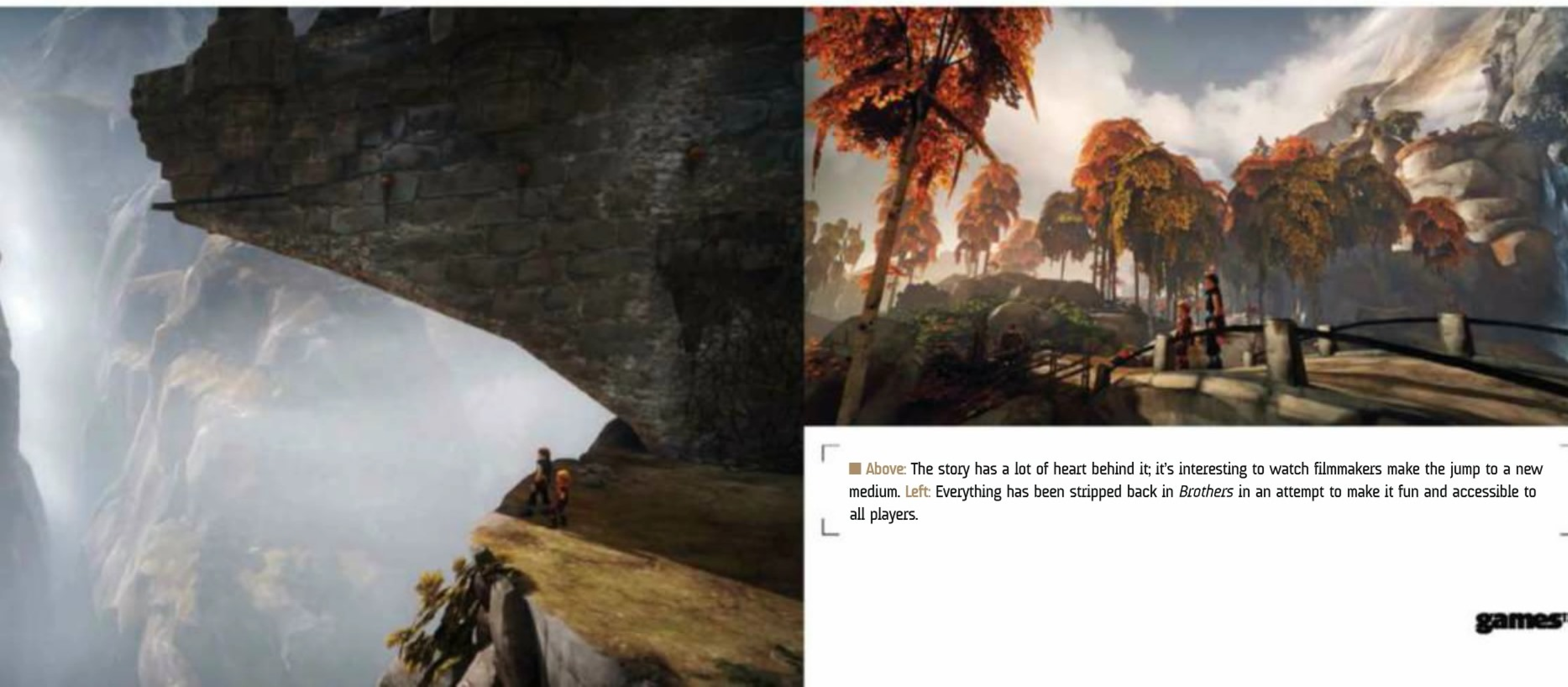
Founded in 1998 under the name Q3 Games, the studio merged with a smaller company in 2000 and Starbreeze Studios was born. The studio built a reputation for itself through *The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay*.

Developer History

Syndicate **2012 [Multi]**
The Chronicles Of Riddick: Assault On Dark Athena **2009 [Multi]**
The Darkness **2007 [X360, PS3]**
The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay **2004 [Multi]**

High Point

Shooting guys in the face and ripping out hearts with creepy tentacles in *The Darkness*.



■ Above: The story has a lot of heart behind it; it's interesting to watch filmmakers make the jump to a new medium. Left: Everything has been stripped back in *Brothers* in an attempt to make it fun and accessible to all players.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

RAMBO: THE VIDEO GAME

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Reef Entertainment
Developer: Teyon
ETA: 2013



SLURRING ITS way onto consoles later in the year, *Rambo* has added some star wattage in the form of its perennial action star, Sylvester Stallone. But rather than recording fresh dialogue for Teyon's adaptation of the post-traumatic-stress-drama-turned-balls-to-the-wall-action saga, Stallone's voice tracks from the first three films will be repurposed and inserted into the final game.

SPACE HULK

Format: PC, iOS
Publisher: Full Control
Developer: In-house
ETA: Late 2013



DANISH OUTFIT Full Control has at last released some screenshots for its adaptation of Games Workshop's popular boardgame, *Space Hulk*. It's slim pickings with just a couple of images: the first portrays a tantalising action sequence of a Space Marine Terminator unleashing its raw firepower, while the second highlights the turn-based RTS gameplay that underlines the central mechanics.

BEYOND: TWO SOULS

Format: PlayStation 3
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Quantic Dream
ETA: 8 October



SONY HAS revealed a release date for David Cage's supernatural thriller *Beyond: Two Souls*, heading onto PlayStation 3 in October. The official announcement was paired with the revelation that snarling character actor Willem Dafoe will be starring alongside Ellen Page in the game – a fact we're fairly sure was already unveiled. Nevertheless, with Dafoe on board, expect some chicanery afoot.

HOMETOWN STORY

Format: 3DS, Mobile
Publisher: Rising Star Games
Developer: Toybox
ETA: 2013



HARVEST MOON creator Yasuhiro Wada's 3DS and mobile venture, *Project Happiness*, now has an official title in *HomeTown Story*. First announced at E3 last year, Wada's new studio Toybox is developing the whimsical adventure, with *Pokémon* character designer Atsuko Nishida and *Final Fantasy* composer Nobuo Uematsu lending their considerable expertise to the project.

TMNT: OUT OF THE SHADOWS

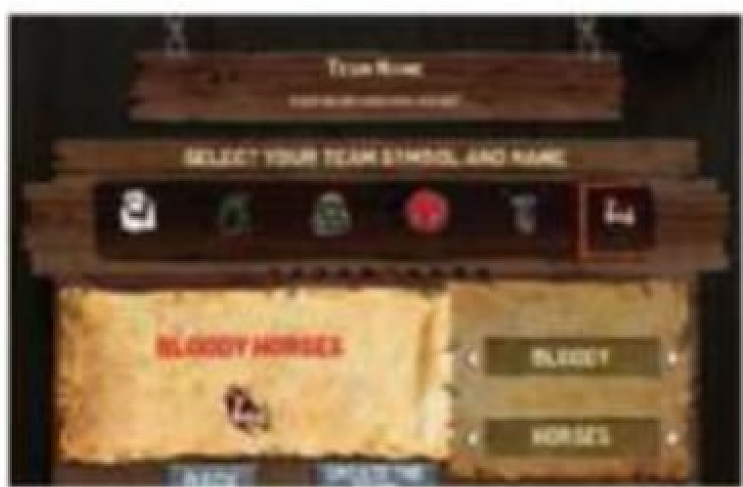
Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Red Fly Studios
ETA: Summer 2013



LEONARDO, MICHELANGELO, Donatello and Raphael are going through something of a renaissance at the moment. Yes, the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* are back in a big way, with Lego sets, a new TV series on air and a Michael Bay movie currently whirling into production in Hollywood. Riding on the coattails of their recent success, Red Fly Studios is bringing a four-payer co-op brawler to us later in the year.

BLOOD BOWL: STAR COACH

Format: PC, Mac, Mobile
Publisher: TBC
Developer: Cyanide
ETA: Late 2013



THE STUDIO best known for last year's *Game Of Thrones* RPG, Cyanide is returning to another popular fantasy realm. Collaborating once again with Games Workshop, development is underway on the studio's second adaptation of the bone-crunching fictional sport Blood Bowl. The action mostly takes place off field, with a focus on strategy and multiplayer in much the same vein as *Football Manager*.

ARMA III

Format: PC
Publisher: Bohemia Interactive
Developer: In-house
ETA: Late 2013



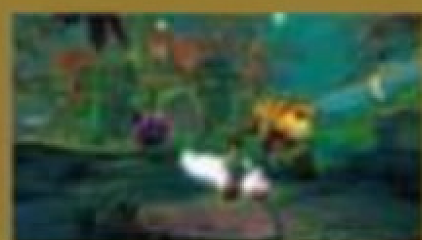
WHILE THE *ArmA* franchise has gained attention in recent months with the runaway success of the *DayZ* mod and the unfortunate incident of two of the game's development team being incarcerated in a Greek prison, the third instalment in the intense military simulator continues to soldier on. Players can enlist in the *ArmA 3* alpha test phase, if you're interested in experiencing the tactical shooter.

MIGHTY SWITCH FORCE 2

Format: 3DS
Publisher: WayForward Technologies
Developer: In-house
ETA: TBC

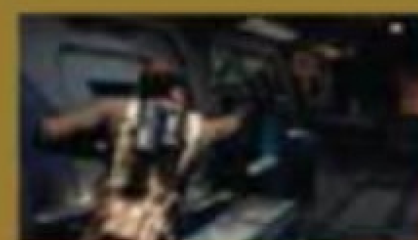


MIGHTY SWITCH Force is getting a sequel in a few months, director Austin Ivansmith has revealed. The original was a side-scrolling puzzle-platformer where your villain-hunting robo-cop was on the trail of the nefarious Hooligan Sisters. This time, however, the protagonist will have "a surprising career change", according to the developer, but we suspect it'll involve the same compulsive action gameplay.



DELAYED – Ratchet & Clank: Q-Force (PS Vita)

The ongoing and inexplicable delay of the PS Vita port of the latest *Ratchet & Clank* has caused so much ire with the fan community that Sony has gifted a bunch of free games to those affected.



DELAYED – Star Wars 1313 (Multi)

According to reports, *Star Wars 1313* – LucasArts' edgy take on the series – has been delayed, possibly indefinitely due to an internal shake-up since the Disney acquisition.

LUMINESCA

Format: **Mac, PC**
Publisher: **CrowbarSka**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



THE INDIE scene is positively bursting with intriguing projects resting on an inventive hook. CrowbarSka (otherwise known as Matt Glanville) has crafted an arresting adventure revolving around bioluminescence in a tranquil sub-aquatic puzzle game. Currently available in its alpha state, there's not a huge amount of complexity here, but we've no doubt that it'll continue to evolve beyond its majestic presentation.

BRAVELY DEFAULT: FLYING FAIRY

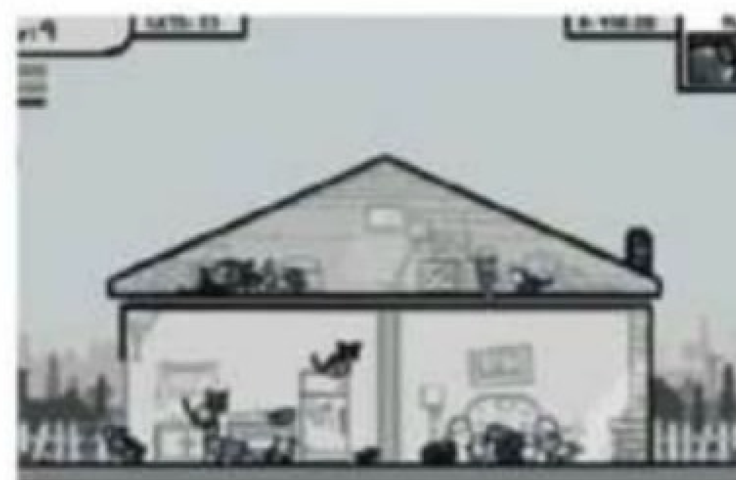
Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Square Enix**
Developer: **Silicon Studio**
ETA: **TBC**



BRAVELY DEFAULT: FLYING FAIRY – the latest RPG from *3D Dot Game Heroes* developer Silicon Studio – arrived in Japan in October last year, and it looks like localisation is underway for western territories. The official Twitter account made a few crudely translated remarks regarding a foreign edition; unless something has been lost in translation, we expect a European release later in the year.

MEW-GENICS

Format: **PC, Mobile**
Publisher: **TBC**
Developer: **Team Meat**
ETA: **2013**



SUPER MEAT BOY creator Edmund McMillen has revealed further details on Team Meat's intriguing cat-centric project *Mew-Genics*. Described as a 'cat lady sim' on their blog, McMillen likens *Mew-Genics* to a cross between *The Sims*, *Pokémon*, *Animal Crossing* and a Tamogotchi. Essentially, you manage a sizeable feline litter, having to battle the eccentric whims, quirks and deformities of each animal.

AZTEZ

Format: **PC, Mac**
Publisher: **Team Colorblind**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2014**



FROM THE indie outfit behind *Off-Road Velociraptor* and *Minotaur China Shop*, Team Colourblind has announced its next project, *Aztez*. It's a *MadWorld*-style brawler in a 2D perspective, combining empire management in-between all the ruthless slaughter. Time will tell whether the studio can successfully marry the surprise of simulation gameplay with a deep and gratifying combat system.

UNTITLED BUGBEAR RACER

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **TBC**
Developer: **Bugbear Entertainment**
ETA: **TBC**



FLATOUT AND *Ride Racer: Unbounded* developer Bugbear Entertainment has revealed its latest project – heading to "yet to be announced platforms" – by way of a teaser video. With the studio no longer owning the rights to the *FlatOut* series and the relative disappointment of *Unbounded*, the studio promises its next-gen racer will go "back to our roots – just like all of our fans have been asking us to do!"

A BIRD STORY

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Freebird Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Mid 2013**



ORIGINALLY REPORTED as a *To The Moon* sequel, Freebird Games' next game is, in fact, *A Bird Story*, set within the same universe as the aforementioned emotional RPG. Set long before the events of *To The Moon*, *A Bird Story* is described as a surreal short involving a bird with a broken wing and a young boy. Sounds like Freebird is aiming to tug on the ol' heart strings once more.

THE ADVENTURES OF DASH

Format: **PC, Mac, Ouya**
Publisher: **Robotoki**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **November 2013**



EX-INFINITY WARD mouthpiece Robert Bowling has taken to Kickstarter to raise funding for his studio Robotoki's maiden game, *The Adventures Of Dash*. It's a puzzle-solving platformer, albeit with an intriguing art style that shifts as the protagonist Dash enters various dream states. By the time you read this you'll know whether Bowling's quirky adventure has reached its goal.

DISGAEA DIMENSIONS 2: A BRIGHTER DARKNESS

Format: **PlayStation 3**
Publisher: **NIS America**
Developer: **Nippon Ichi Software**
ETA: **Autumn 2013**



EUROPEAN FANS of the turn-based strategy series *Disgaea* have something to be happy about; NIS America will be publishing *Disgaea Dimensions 2: A Brighter Darkness* on the PlayStation 3 in PAL territories later in the year. Unsurprisingly, the game is already available in Japan, but Western gamers will have to wait until autumn to get their hands on the cult RPG.



WHY I ❤...

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

RASMUS HØJENGAARD, CRYTEK

I've been playing games since I was six or seven years old, and it's all about pinpointing a particular game that did something for you. I loved playing Skyrim. *Sure, there were a few things I didn't like about it, but as a package it's probably the game that isn't online or an MMO that I've spent the most hours playing and replaying. The combination of being able to mod and customise user content, together with the game being a massive experience – I'm already planning on starting a new character for when I start playing* Dragonborn *– it has longevity on multiple levels! That's not even from my professional game development point of view, but just how I found that world to be so completely immersive.*

"It's probably the game that isn't online or an MMO that I've spent the most hours playing"

RASMUS HØJENGAARD, CRYTEK

Shadows IN THE Dark

Out of the shadows and into the future

I've been away, but I couldn't tell you where," mutters Garrett, the star of the series, as the first ever footage of *Thief* begins in Eidos Montreal's theatre room. The landscape of stealth games has evolved over the decade, and as Garrett prepares to step out of the deadly shadows and back into the pseudo-Victorian metropolis known as The City for a new generation of gamers, it isn't long before we come to understand the plight of its people. As Garrett puts it, "It's better to remain free in the city of chains – that is still the greatest prize."

Times have moved on and the powers of The City have shifted; the region is ruled by an iron-fisted baron who is pushing forward with industry and revolution. "He wants to change everything and push [The City] into a new progressive time… at the expense of the people, of course," explains Stephen Gallagher, the narrative director of *Thief* who has fingerprints across Hollywood through films such as *Gladiator* and *Entrapment*. "Garrett is forced to walk a thin line between two political powers, the baron versus the people, struggling for control in a city that's falling apart."

Much has changed, then, but to the master thief it doesn't much matter who holds the keys to the city as long as there is a prize to be found. Slipping back into The City via a wagon, we get our first look at the Stonemarket district that will act as the hub world for our criminal activity. From the shadows we watch as blue lightning cracks the sky, revealing bodies of plague victims piled up on the streets. Propaganda posters adorn the buildings, speaking of good fortune; the reality isn't nearly as wealthy for the oppressed citizens drowning in the cascading rain. Guards patrol the city streets with a stern boot, men are left to rot in the stockades and preachers find only deaf ears – all while the rich and powerful gleefully meander the city like it were their own personal sandbox.

As Garrett steps out of the cover of the wagon and into The City's imposing shadows, we overhear a conversation between two guards: Theodore Eastwick, The City's principle architect, has stepped out of the safety of seclusion and into the filth of The City to attend The House Of Blossoms, an underground whorehouse that services much of The City's elite. "The prize bird out of his gilded cage. I won't get a better chance than this – time to pluck the golden goose," growls an excited Garrett. The challenge begins here.

We move swiftly through the streets as the clock tower begins to chime. The House Of Blossoms will lock its doors at midnight; if Garrett misses this window of opportunity, another way in will





Garrett's new look was designed by Nicolas Cantin, the game director who lent his hand to *Assassin's Creed*'s Altaïr.

need to be discovered. Stepping into the shadows creates a misty hue around the edges of the screen to indicate our connection with the night. As Garrett slowly moves behind crates and walls, he places his hands on everything around him to hold balance and gain leverage. It's surprising how such a small detail can create such a strong sense of place.

Multiple guards position themselves on the streets, creating safe passage for Eastwick. While violence can be used to clear a path, it should never be the first choice; Garrett is a master thief, not a petty pickpocket or assassin. A bottle is lifted from a crate and thrown to create a distraction. Garrett quickly dashes behind the guards, scaling a pipe and running from rooftop to rooftop. Birds flutter away as you disturb the silence; the guards look up with curiosity.

Garrett eventually catches a glance of Eastwick from above. A large medallion hangs from his neck like an albatross. Garrett knows his prize will be grand on this night, though the seconds are beginning to slip away. Sometimes stealth needs to go on the offensive. Combat is slick and effortless; an arrow is quickly released to take out a distant guard, and another is dispatched with a satisfying third-person takedown before he can raise the alarm. Bodies can be dragged and hidden, of course, but Garrett doesn't have time. As he hits street level, we can see plenty of shadows dressing the long street, the City's large towers and menacing architecture creating the perfect playground for the master thief. We quickly break cover, bounding over merchant tables and sliding under wagons as guards question the movement through the darkness. It's wildly impressive in motion; an industrial *Mirror's Edge* that does wonders to highlight the allure of a first-person stealth game.

This is our first introduction to the new world of *Thief*, and as Garrett reaches the secret entrance to The House Of Blossoms it's hard not to be inspired by what Eidos Montreal has constructed. The slickness of movement and sense of precision, even at speed, is empowering. But if that's starting to sound familiar to you, then you're not alone.

Influencing The Design

■ Eidos is striving for an unparalleled level of synergy between its oppressed world and our own. When creating Garrett's weapons and costume they took to forging real-life counterpart – quite literally when it came to the master thief's retractable bow. Eidos commissioned a local blacksmithing forge, Les Forges de Montreal, to create Garrett's bow. They found steel to be too heavy to allow the mechanisms to work, so after over 600 man-hours and a hefty amount of titanium, Les Forges de Montreal forged the weapon – with their changes actually influencing the final and in-game design to better reflect how it would work in reality.



■ The City draws influence from many architectural designs and cultures, though Eidos was eager to make sure it didn't make the world too Gothic.



The road to this revival has been long and well travelled by Eidos, and, while he would never admit it, a lot has been placed on the weary shoulders of Garrett. It was as early as 2008 that the newly formed Eidos Montreal studio began to hint it had acquired the *Thief* licence from the recently defunct Looking Glass Studios, though we had to wait until May 2009 before it was officially unveiled as *Thief 4* (or Thi4f, thanks to a bit of much-despised logo play). The project quickly dropped into the shadows, making way for *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* in 2011. Still, no new information was revealed, and as the studio announced it was hard at work on *Tomb Raider*'s multiplayer, many feared the worst for the revival of this beloved stealth franchise.



"2009 was the official announcement, but that doesn't mean we didn't start to work the day after on the product," explains producer Stephane Roy. "From the beginning it was 100 per cent sure that [the goal was] to restart it, to reinvent it, to make sure that you are going to perceive us as a part of the future and not part of the past."

"It's a big task, especially with *Thief* because people hate or love this franchise – it really is a polarisation," claims Roy, adding, "We have to be really solid when we make a decision; we have to be able to explain why and be sure it supports the DNA of the franchise. It's been a big challenge to find all the elements, because making a game is one thing, but really making sure it's *Thief* and not just another game? That one takes time."

Eidos Montreal is tackling the reboot with precision, then. It is certainly aware of the difficulties in reinventing a franchise, but for Roy a pure reinvention of the series was the only way to move forward with the project.

"It's not a sequel – Garrett is back, [we see it as] a bit like what Christopher Nolan did with Batman, for example. It's Batman, he still has the same mental problems with bats and stuff like that, but his suit has more modern aspects and not just this thin Adam West costume… it respects the franchise. It emphasises what we are doing now."

During our time at the Montreal studio, we spoke with many members of the development team,

Eidos wouldn't reveal much about the Stonemarket, saying only that it would act as a mini hub, allowing for seamless transitions between missions, side quests and Garrett's hideout.

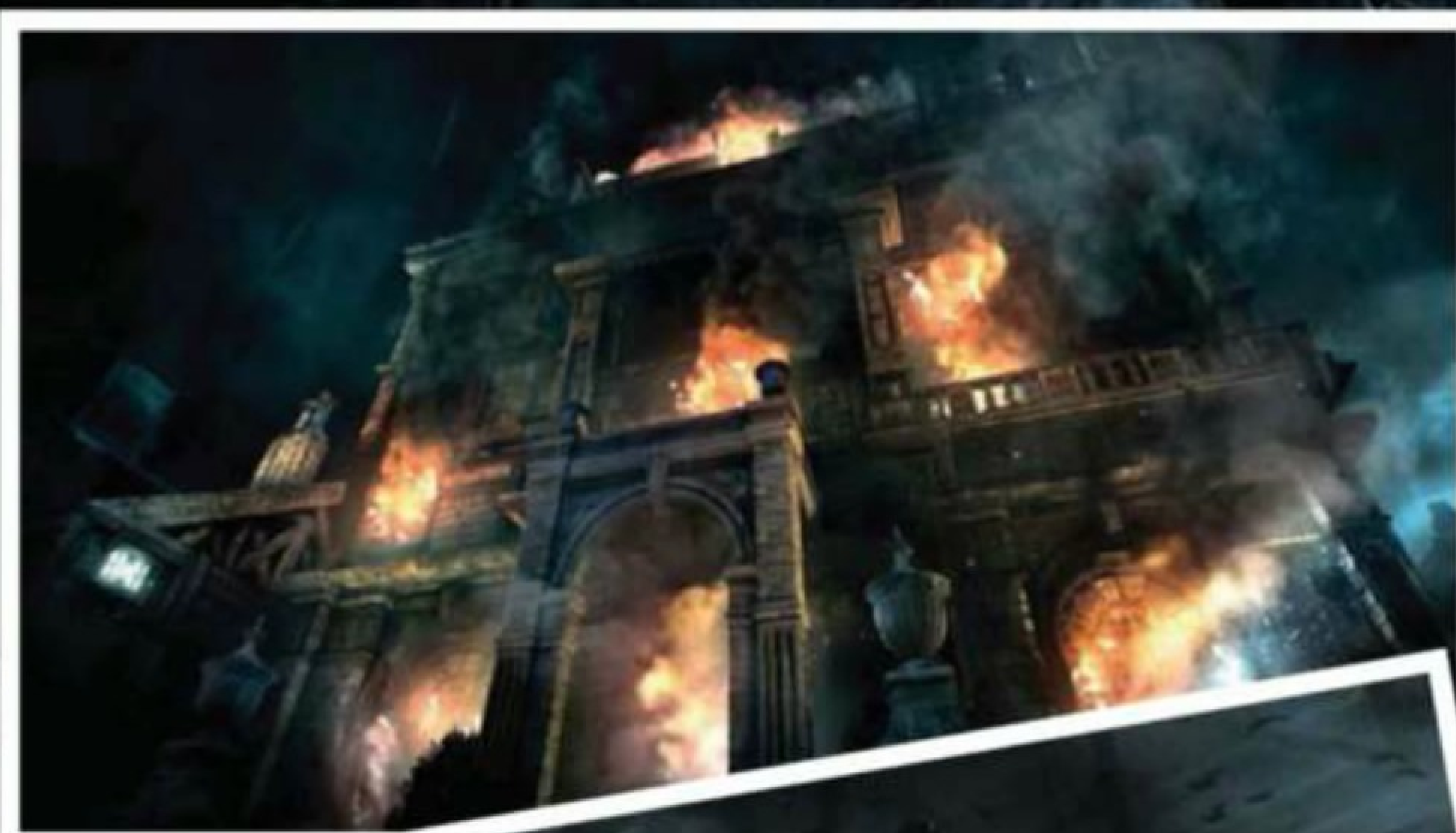
"Our goal was to reinvent the series that we all loved, that we all respect"

Eidos Montreal hopes that being able to see Garrett's hands interact with his environments will immerse players in the world.

NEXT-GENERATION THIEVERY

THIEF IS ONE of the only third-party games announced exclusively for next-generation platforms, so there was the question of why the team decided to skip a generation. "All of the team members that joined this project just wanted to push the envelope so far in each of their departments," says Nicolas Cantin, before Stephane Roy jumps in. "Next gen is really interesting to us for the immersion. Now if you peek and you check something there are no pixelated textures or something like that. The dense city – the immersion – this is where the next generation is really great for this type of game. It's not a question of having more polygons or big explosions – no, no, no. You are going to be Garrett in The City, and when you are going to see his hands peeking out it will be your hands. This is where next gen helps us. We are going to be able to avoid the 'loading, loading, loading'. Now there's no more loading, because next gen is here."

While it's the same-old Garrett, Eidos is being cagey on how this ties into the larger mythology. They wouldn't even confirm if it was the same returning voice actor.





and if they all wanted to instil any one ideal it was one of responsibility to the franchise and its past, even while forging a new future. "Our goal was to reinvent the series that we all loved, that we all respect, and on that side it was our goal to respect the main pillars [of the franchise], but also to give a new edgy side to the game," says technical art director Jean-Normand Bucci.

Of course, as the new face of *Thief* was revealed to the world (sans the '4'), legions of fans descended upon the screenshots and news like vultures. But the most surprising thing to come out of *Thief*'s next-generation debut was its comparison to Arkane's *Dishonored*.

"Between the last *Thief* game and the one we are going to release in 2014, a decade will be between the two games. A lot of players on the forum will ask us to just remake the first one, and we really believe if we do it would be a mistake – the way we played games then and the way we play games today has changed a lot. It is subtle evolution." So, "Why now?" was the question we posed to the team throughout our time at the studio, and the same answer kept coming to the front of our discussions.

"I think the best proof is *Dishonored*," claims Roy. "*Dishonored* proves that the interest is there. Obviously,



When sneaking, shadow is your best friend and light is your greatest enemy. Thankfully, Garrett can use his arrows to extinguish fires, causing an ample distraction to slip past guards undetected.

there is a lot of comparison; for me it's amazing to see how *Thief* has been a good inspiration for *Dishonored*, because *Thief* is the godfather for that type of game. Definitely the timing for us is just perfect, because the door is wide open." Though as lead level designer Daniel Windfeld Schmidt counters, there is a risk that players won't identify *Thief* as the predecessor. "A lot of people heard about *Thief* but never played it. The *Thief* universe has a lot to offer," says Schmidt, before Roy jumps back in. "You know [as a veteran player of the series] that *Dishonored* has been inspired by *Thief*. But for a lot of players they are going to see us and think, 'Oh okay, the inspiration is *Dishonored*'."

"When we started three years ago stealth wasn't that popular any more. Today it's really coming back and we are really happy about that," says Game Director Nicolas Cantin, adding, "When they announced it we were like, 'Oh my god, they are inspired by *Thief*,' [but] when we played it we realised that, frankly, it was a bit more action-oriented, like *Deus Ex*. I really tried to play it stealth… but it didn't reward you that much as a stealth player. And then you finish the map and can take a gun and [shoot]. This, for me, was breaking the stealth experience that I tried to have." Bucci agrees: "He's an assassin – you're a master thief."

This distinction becomes crystal clear as we begin our decent into The House Of Blossoms. Blackjack in hand, we elect to take a hidden side entrance into the building instead of storming the front gates. We see Garrett creep past guards by sneaking across supporting beams, and eventually grapple across the inside of the building as it crumbles apart. While these sections take place in third person, Schmidt affirms that it's purely to help players traverse these sections with accuracy, and that a full third-person mode simply doesn't work in the context of *Thief*. "One of the things we tested in the old days was a whole third-person version of this game, like *Deadly Shadows* had. But something that was really missing was *that* immersion."

> *"Making a game is one thing, but really making sure it's Thief and not just another game? That one takes time…"*

Garrett enters the house undetected and our playground is revealed. The House Of Blossoms is an underground bordello for the rich; scantily clad ladies saunter around, serving drinks and offering their services to the men in masquerade and in the thrall of an opium haze.

"It is my great pleasure to greet you on this auspicious occasion – the anniversary of my birth," declares 'Madame' Xiao Xiao, the transvestite that rules over this house of decadence. "Some of you may notice the additional protection this evening. They are only here for your safety and will not disturb you. Those of you who have something particularly valuable you wish to secure may speak to me personally, and I'll see them stored in my office strongbox." This is an offer that Eastwick ignores – not that a strongbox is safe from Garrett's prying hands.

It's here that we get to see Garrett's tricks at play. Eidos Montreal has introduced a mechanic called Focus, which makes the player feel like they are filling Garrett's boots. Focus replaces the mechanical eye that Garrett had in previous iterations, though careful inspection of the concept art reveals the thief has eyes

As long as Garrett is hidden in shadow, he is at an advantage. One particularly impressive scene sees Garrett stalking a room behind a guard, using their shadow as cover as he moves along the enemy patrol.

Like any good archer, Garrett is able to utilise multiple arrowheads to create distractions. No word on whether the rope arrows will return though.

of different colour – not that the studio would go into any more depth regarding this. Focus is a resource that empowers the player, highlighting objects of interest and NPCs who may be carrying items of worth.

We see Garrett dance through the shadows, avoiding guards and some of the more attentive patrons, taking a number of valuables as he makes his way towards Xiao Xiao's private office: a jewelled cup is swiped from a table; a gold pocket watch from a passed-out gentlemen; a pair of earrings from a woman as she makes her way down a staircase. Focus not only highlights objects, but it also increases the speed and efficiency in which Garrett can steal, pickpocket and lockpick.

A quick read of Xiao Xiao's logbook reveals which room Eastwick has occupied for the night, though before setting out to locate it, Garrett takes the time to lighten the strongbox the illustrious owner spoke of before. A lockpicking minigame begins, tasking the player with aligning the tumblers of the lock to open it successfully. Using Focus has the tumblers practically fall in place; a jeweled heirloom is Garrett's prize.

Madame Xiao Xiao can be heard outside the office arguing with a girl. It becomes incredibly tense, with audio cues bringing the only distinction between safety and the promise of capture. Garrett uses Focus to inspect the room, discovering a hidden passageway that seemingly connects to every room in the house. Using the network of corridors, Garrett is able to partake in a healthy amount of voyeurism, spying on the patrons as they begin to settle in for the night – and taking the opportunity to sneak into the rooms, stealing wedding rings and other personal affects while the gentlemen are distracted.

Eventually, Eastwick's room is discovered, though he clearly has an ulterior motive for attending the pleasure house. After dispatching of his girl with a chloroform handkerchief, he begins to desperately inspect the walls. "It has to be this one," he mutters. "This is the last room in the house." Intrigued, Garrett wastes no time slipping into the room and snatching the large medallion Eastwick foolishly turned his back on. Ancient runes are carved into its surface; this will make a fine prize for his hideout (or a tidy profit), and it's here where you can choose to explore more of the building's mysteries or make your victorious escape.

Garrett's curiosity gets the better of him in our playthrough, of course. Using Focus to inspect the room reveals the hidden

Better With Friends?

"WE DON'T SUPPORT multiplayer," states Marc Benoit. "We want to build the best single-player experience we can. We don't want to waste resources. We have another game mode, but it's not multiplayer. But we are really, really focused on building the best single-player experience we can, so no multiplayer." The developers seem very keen throughout the studio to emphasise the pillars of what made the *Thief* series popular to begin with. "He's a loner, he works by himself, he doesn't like other players."



"You can play our game completely without killing anyone. This is something that's very important for us"



Introducing An Anti-Hero

DESPITE BEING A REBOOT of the series, previous protagonist Garrett is returning to the forefront of *Thief*. As game director Nicolas Cantin puts it, this was never up for debate. "Garrett is back. Like we said, we reinvent the series but there are some pillars we want to respect and keep; Garrett is one of them, probably the most important of them." This is a point Steven Gallagher is keen to iterate: "Garrett is quite anti-social. He doesn't talk to a lot of people, he doesn't have a Facebook account and he doesn't shake hands very much. But he's incredibly intellectual and he would be amazing to talk to, so luckily for us he talks to himself."

glyph that Eastwick is desperately searching for. The glyph can be entered into by using the medallion like a decoder ring. After quick inspection of the adjacent rooms, the medallion whirs to life and reveals a blue energy pulsating from its core. Before Garrett gets a chance to consider what exactly he has discovered, Eastwick realises his precious medallion is missing and raises the alarm. It is time for Garrett to make a hasty escape.

"*Thief* was always based on stealth, but even in the original games you can be aggressive," began Schmidt. "What we wanted to do was maintain that feeling of freedom, so in a straight-up combat, mano-a-mano kind of thing, you're at a disadvantage. You're against trained soldiers – this is your backup plan, and the last thing you want to do when you get into a mess."

A mess it was. Guards began to swarm the area and the patrons started to realise their possessions were missing, and Garrett's options for escape were dissolving. By using shadows and peeking around corners he was able to quickly move back to the main chamber, but, as guards continued to create a panic, the chance of discovery was becoming more likely.

Garrett recalls a conversation overheard, revealing one of the mission's side quests and many ways to facilitate an escape. A previous disaster at The House Of Blossoms involved an abundance of opium, causing the guests to pass out. Garrett makes his way to the opium chambers, slowly setting the trap as guards inspect the room – it's edge-of-the-seat the entire time.

As soon as the hypnotic drug begins to flood the rooms, Garrett breaks shadow and sprints for the exit, encountering a group of guards on the way. He doesn't have time to dispatch them one by one, and too long in the rooms will render him unconscious, too. He quickly lets fly an arrow at a statue, causing it to fall and crush a guard. From there he sprints into the next room and activates Focus, allowing him to pinpoint various attack points on the body of another guard to maximise damage. Time is of the essence, so a pinpoint strike pushes the guard aside – though the three outside need more convincing. Here we see a chain attack: pinpointing multiple attack points, violence starts in motion as Garrett grabs one guard's arm and jerks it back to shatter the bones with a sickening crack; the other two are left to the mercy of his boot as he brute-forces them into a chasm. More guards begin to swarm, so Garrett makes his escape much the same as his arrival – into the shadows, grappling a vent and disappearing into the same hole that stole the guard's lives.

His escape wasn't pretty, but it got the job done. It served to highlight the many ways in which to tackle a mission. Each room offers multiple entrances and exits, our experience being just one of a handful of ways to tackle the objective at hand. Thief is designed specifically with any and all players in mind.

"The objective is never to assassinate anybody, never to be aggressive. But for some players, they find satisfaction in removing everybody from a playing field," says Schmidt, before revealing the multiple levels of difficulty the team is building into the game. "You can play our game completely without killing anyone; this is something that's very important for us. The Blackjack doesn't kill anybody, it only makes them unconscious, [though] you can go through without knocking anybody out, too. Can you get through this without ever being seen or heard? Now we are bringing a whole new level of difficulty."

The world of *Thief* is alive again. After a decade's hiatus, Eidos Montreal is ready to unleash the classic stealth series on a whole new generation when it arrives on PC, PS4 and other 'next-generation systems' in 2014. It has a lot to prove, somehow stuck in the shadow of *Dishonored*. But put any doubt and concern aside – *Thief* is easily the most impressive game from the opening salvo in the next-gen race.



THE HOUSE OF BLOSSOMS IS A SHINING EXAMPLE OF THE CITY'S UNDERGROUND. ITS VISITORS ARE SO ZONED-OUT ON OPIUM AND WOMEN THEY HARDLY NOTICE THE THIEF.

AFTER EIGHT YEARS IN BUSINESS AND MORE THAN 50 EPISODES SHIPPED, TELLTALE FINALLY HIT THE JACKPOT WITH THE WALKING DEAD. WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE ONLY STUDIO THAT'S FIGURED OUT HOW TO MAKE EPISODIC GAMING WORK?

TELLTALE GAMES AN EPISODIC SUCCESS





■ "*The Walking Dead*, in my mind, is a role-playing game," Bruner says. "I take on the role of Lee Everett, I become him and want to take care of Clementine. I don't know if there's a word for the genre other than 'Telltale-style role playing'."



■ "We certainly hoped that *Jurassic Park* would have been better received," Bruner says of the poorly reviewed dino drama. "We're very proud of what we did in *Jurassic Park*, but it just didn't work. Wrong kind of game at the wrong time."



■ The decision to make a sequel to *Tales Of Monkey Island* might be out of their hands, but would Telltale want to if given the opportunity? "I think you'd find that there's a lot of enthusiasm about another *Monkey Island* game here," Bruner says.

"Marketplace realities and underlying economic considerations" – those are what prompted former LucasArts employees Kevin Bruner and Dan Connors to start Telltale Games in 2004, as chief technology officer and CEO respectively. LucasArts had just pulled the plug on its current project, *Sam & Max: Freelance Police*, more than two years into its development, claiming in a terse statement that the timing wasn't "appropriate". In other words, adventure games were dead.

"There were so many projects that were not doing well at Lucas that we felt like we were the baby in the bath water," says Bruner. "It was very disappointing and discouraging. It certainly influenced our decision to start Telltale. We really didn't want to start over on a new, giant three-year project after not finishing *Freelance Police*. That would have meant about five years without shipping a game and that was unacceptable for me as a developer."

Forget one game every three years; to date, Bruner and company have shipped more than 50. Their most recent opus is *The Walking Dead*, a five-episode series set among the carnage of Robert Kirkman's zombie apocalypse comics. Its cinematic presentation, absorbing story and wrenching, choice-driven gameplay have nabbed the game more than 100 awards, including five VGAs and two BAFTAs. More than 8.5 million episodes have been sold, earning the independent developer a neat $40 million. It's far and away the most recognized of Telltale's games – no small feat when emerging from a line-up that includes *Sam & Max*, *Monkey Island*, *Back To The Future* and *Wallace & Gromit*.

Nearly nine years have passed since Bruner and Connors established Telltale to develop episodic, story-based games; why all the sudden attention? Bruner can think of a few reasons: *The Walking Dead* was Telltale's first series to launch simultaneously on PC, consoles, and iOS devices; the franchise is "bigger and more modern" than any licence it has worked on before; and the team has, quite frankly, gotten better at interactive storytelling. Plus, players finally seem to be on board with the episodic structure Telltale has championed since its earliest days.

"One of the things *The Walking Dead* did better than any of our other series is [the episodic format]," says Bruner. "The spaces in-between

■ *Back To The Future* demonstrated what the studio could do with a solid property behind it and a talented team of writers keen to update it. It's no surprise that there was a lot of anticipation for *Jurassic Park* at the end of 2011.



■ "We sort of knew that there was a strong possibility that we'd get cancelled given what was happening at the time, but we really had hope that we would survive," Bruner says of the ill-fated *Sam & Max: Freelance Police*.



■ Telltale fans may be disappointed that the company's immediate plans don't involve revisiting earlier series like *Strong Bad* or *Sam & Max*. "It's not so much a need as an opportunity," Bruner says of the desire to sign new licences.



episodes – and the tension and the water-cooler effect of visiting with your friends and asking what choices they made – [improved] the overall game experience. I really believe that if *The Walking Dead* was released as a single game on a disc, it would have felt very different. I think that's us getting good at episodic [games] and using the format not just to differentiate the content from the rest of the market, but really coming into our own – to be able to say, 'We use this as an expressive medium that allows us to make games that are different and better because they're episodic'."

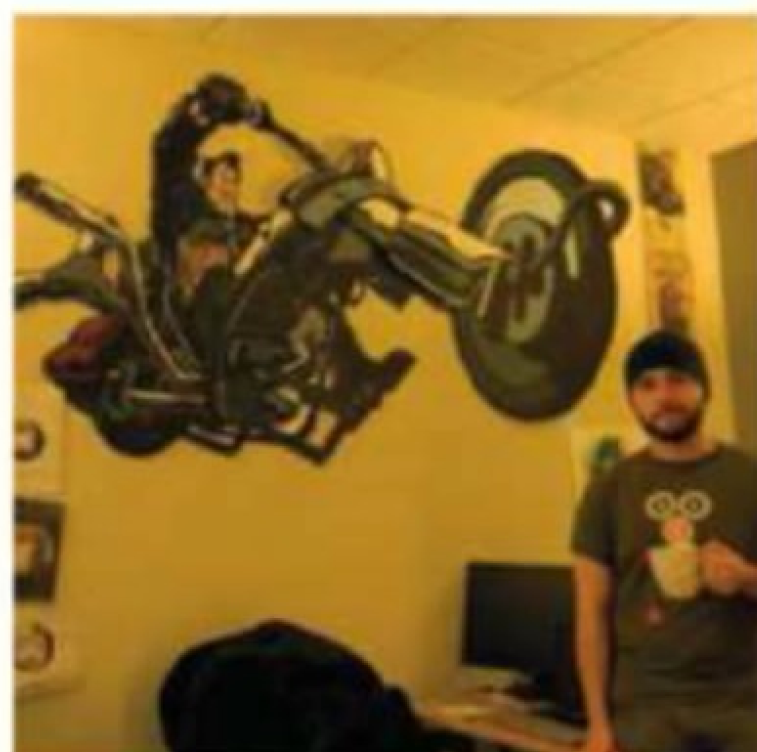
The reception is especially surprising when you consider that Telltale's previous attempt, *Jurassic Park*, tanked horribly – games™ scored it 3/10 on account of its poorly implemented QTEs, confusing controls and dull plotline.

"*Jurassic Park* came on the heels of *Monkey Island* and *Back To The Future*, which were two really traditional point-and-click adventure games that received a lot of accolades. We were excited to get back into more of the experimental storytelling gameplay and we had a lot of pent-up ideas, I guess, that came out," Bruner reasons. "We really put a lot on the table, from not being able to control the playable character, to having the story told from a lot of different characters' points of view and lots of quick time events – it was a really big change and maybe we just piled too much on our plate at once."

Though it was originally conceived as a four-episode series, business decisions resulted in *Jurassic Park* shipping as one complete game, which took a toll on its design. "One benefit of episodic is that we get to have a conversation with the people who are playing the game while we're making it, and that really does inform us. It allows us to figure out what's working and what's not working, what aspects people are understanding and really enjoying versus aspects that aren't coming across. We didn't have that opportunity on *Jurassic Park*. It would have been helpful," Bruner admits. But despite its failings, he credits the game for the studio's more recent success: "I don't believe that we would have gotten to *The Walking Dead* without pushing ourselves to get out of our comfort zone like we did with *Jurassic Park*. It was a very important part of the evolution, on our mission to modernise and experiment with modern adventure games and story games."

It's a mission he feels few studios are trying to tackle right now. "It can get a little exhausting, like you're banging your head against the wall – but when you're trying to solve a problem the rest of the industry isn't trying to solve, sometimes it feels that way," Bruner says. "But we're really committed to this. I think Telltale is a bit of a mecca for people who love characters and stories in games, and love the way old adventure games made them feel, and want to build games like that. So even on days where you're trying things that don't work and feeling defeated, there's enough positive energy about solving the problem that you can always find somebody who's willing to roll up their sleeves that day and get you back on the right track."

Determined not to repeat *Jurassic Park*'s mistakes, the studio took a hard look at its plans for *The Walking Dead* and opted to focus on one of several possible experiments: player choice. Following the comics' lead, the designers had always planned to present players with many tough decisions that had no right answers. But the call to "go all in on choice", as Bruner describes the key gameplay mechanic, wasn't made until soon before the series debuted. "*Episode One* got an enormous amount of scrutiny. It was really experimental – we were really nervous about how it was going to play and how it would



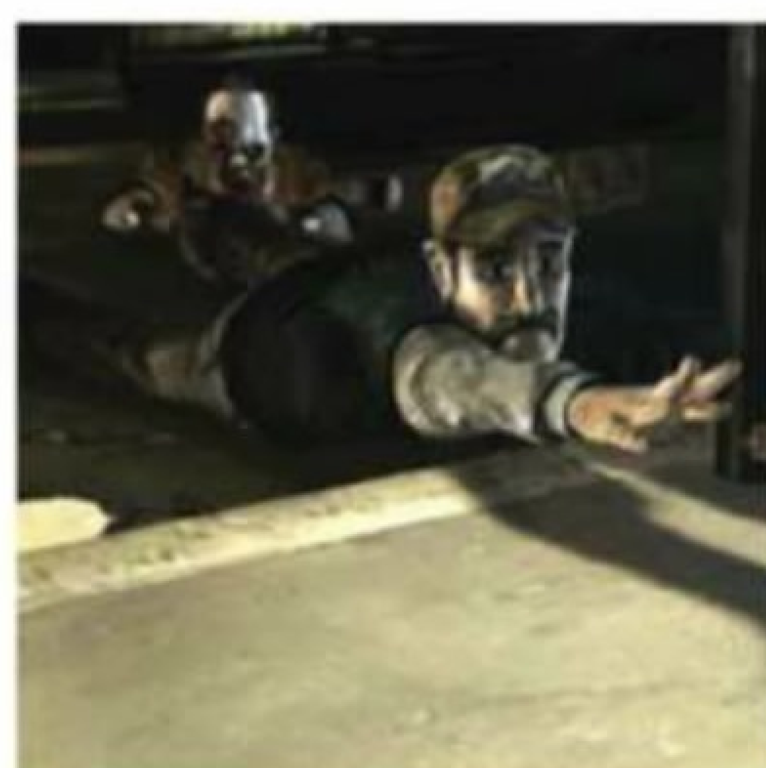






■ Even while other local developers like Nihilistic are closing, Telltale has moved into a larger office. "I am proud, but there are days when I don't recognise people!" Bruner laughs. "We get people who start and it takes me a week to figure out that they're new, you pass somebody in the hall and you're like, 'Are they visiting or do they work here?' That's a very strange feeling."

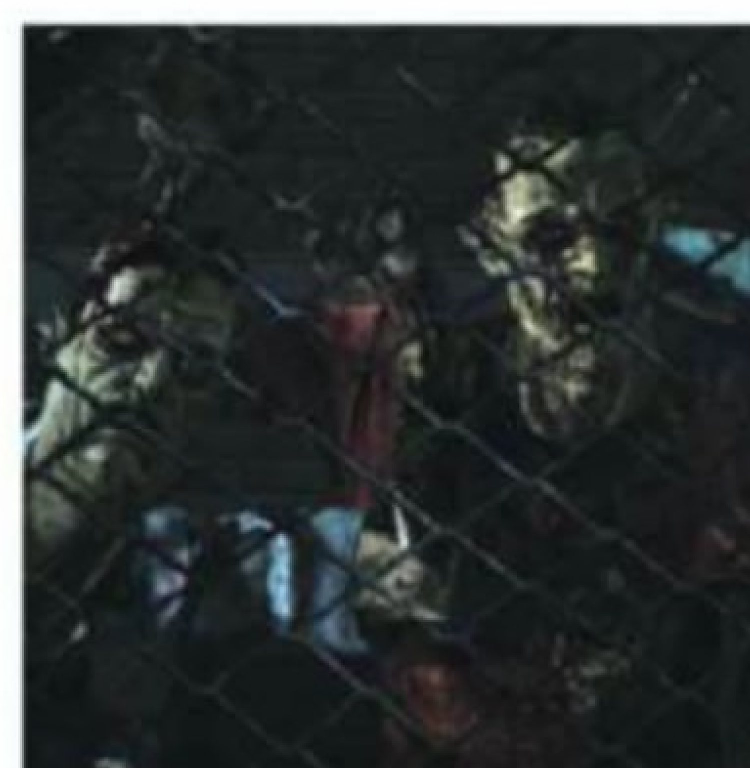
■ The stats displayed at the end of each *Walking Dead* episode turned out to be one of the most successful aspects. "[Social features] are something that we're going to be doing aggressively for the next game series," Bruner says.



■ Though they'll keep experimenting with interactive storytelling, Bruner promises that Telltale won't abandon its roots completely: "*The Walking Dead* didn't have a lot of puzzles in it; that doesn't mean we're abandoning puzzles."



■ Some elements of the original design were sacrificed. "A lot of interactive storytelling techniques and gameplay mechanics were kind of left on the cutting room floor, and those are things that we want to explore," Bruner says.



■ "We really like being able to build worlds that people can go in and experiment with," Bruner says. "But they're not sandbox worlds. They're places where you can go and play a role in the story."





"I remember when *Sam & Max* was first being sold; it was a weekend and I was checking on my phone and seeing that people were buying *Sam & Max*. And I was like, 'People are buying *Sam & Max* while I'm standing on the street corner! This is amazing!'" Bruner laughs. "Now that's the norm; [the studio] really has a life of its own and it's not 20 people who are pushing every button and pulling every lever all the time – which is really nice, but it's a different experience."



"The project was in pretty good shape budget and schedule-wise," says Bruner, in regret. Currently Telltale has no plans for a revival, but had it seen the light of day, *Sam & Max: Freelance Police* would have been a prototype for Telltale's episodic model as we know it today. "*Freelance Police* was designed as a series of episodes, like a TV show," Bruner says. "Our original vision was to do more 'television-style' gaming."

be received and if it was working. We kept refining it and as it kept getting better we were really impressed – but it involved a lot of rewrites and creative design, and the whole team working really passionately. It was a taxing process for everybody."

These last-minute changes put a big crimp in the schedule: "We had *Episode Two* [development] going on at the same time and it wasn't getting that level of scrutiny. We actually had all the voice recorded for *Episode Two*, and as it was coming together we looked at it and it seemed like a completely different game. So we had to scramble to rewrite *Episode Two*. The big story beats are still there, but it was a huge amount of work. That got us way behind, and consequently we ended up with the entire studio working on *The Walking Dead* to stay on schedule, which we've never done before. We've never had all 120 people at Telltale dedicated to one game."

" WE WERE REALLY NERVOUS ABOUT HOW IT WAS GOING TO PLAY AND HOW IT WOULD BE RECEIVED AND IF IT WAS WORKING "

In fact, this is precisely the opposite of what Bruner and Connors envisioned when they dreamed up 'television-style gaming', with plans to eventually have multiple teams working on different series simultaneously and a new Telltale episode releasing every week. They seemed to be on track for this when an unprecedented six new projects were announced in early 2011; but for all its recent growth (the company has roughly doubled in size over the past two years), they're not releasing games any faster. Instead, it's changed its approach.

"We've rearranged the internal structure of the company, where our creative department has been split into a more design-centric side and a more writing-centric side," Bruner explains. "They still all work together and they're all fantastic storytellers, but there's a group who are all about writing dialogue and developing characters, and then there are some who are all about designing, playing interactive stories and puzzle design." Under this new system, a different designer-writer team is assigned to each episode, and "when you get

MAKING IT UP AS THEY GO ALONG

A major benefit of Telltale's episodic production is the freedom it gives to adapt later episodes based on feedback. "One of the best examples of that is Ben from *The Walking Dead*, the high school kid," Bruner says. "He was supposed to be this bumbling guy whose heart was in the right place, but everything he did put you in danger or was bad for the group. But we knew, because we could pay attention to the way that people were playing, that he could do no wrong. We couldn't make him bumbling enough that people would throw him under the bus... Since we knew that was going on, there's a speech that he gives in *Episode Four* where he kind of snaps... and that's to help the player reconsider, 'Oh man, this guy is kind of a jerk!' That was supposed to be happening more subtly along the way, but because it was episodic and we could pay attention, we knew that this was something we wanted to tweak so that when people held Ben's life in the balance they'd have a more difficult time with that decision. That's one of the benefits of being episodic."





"We were working at a furious pace, the entire studio, to keep up," Bruner says of *The Walking Dead*'s crunched schedule. After reworking *Episode Two*, "We didn't really have the luxury to sit back and say 'Oh, people didn't get that, so let's do with *Episode Two* what we did with *Episode Three*.' We had to learn our lessons very quickly and apply that knowledge – we just didn't have the opportunity to react as quickly as we might normally do, because we were behind schedule at that point."



■ "Sometimes when a character dies it's not in player control per se, and the number of people that go back and are like, 'I'm just going to find a way to keep that character alive, I know there has to be a way' – I think that really delivers *The Walking Dead* experience."



■ Fun fact: Doomed survivor Doug is modelled after a former Telltale employee, right down to the t-shirt. Other characters with real-world counterparts include Omid (a friend of one of the designers) and Brie (a Telltale contest winner).



■ Following the success of *The Walking Dead*, Telltale has already began work on the second season, which is expected by the end of the year. The studio has also suggested that there may be additional content on the way for the first season.

those two [roles] put together just right, it's pretty magic." Then there's the director, who decides how to represent the story visually, much like a film or TV director would: "Once the episode is designed and written you have this other personality who comes into the mix to interpret that and come up with the best way to tell that story. All of those things came together in the right way with *The Walking Dead,* where it was probably the most intensely designed game we've done – the best written game and the best directed game."

Such shared responsibility is a far cry from the studio's early days working on its first *Sam & Max* series, when one game designer was in charge of designing, writing and directing all of the episodes – a workload that quickly led to burnout. "That's murder on the person who does the job. It's really hard to find brilliant designers who are also brilliant writers and brilliant leaders, all at the same time," Bruner acknowledges. "We're really blessed at Telltale, where we've got some amazingly talented people who choose to work here and express their craft with us – but when you're asking that much of an individual that frequently, even the best wear out eventually. So we think that this is much healthier."

With this improved structure and their newfound recognition in hand, Telltale plans to keep growing. It's just moved to into a bigger building, and it's a good thing, too, because licence holders keep calling. "The success of *The Walking Dead* is opening up an enormous number of opportunities for us. We certainly have more games that we could make right now than we have people to make them," Bruner says. Even so, he doesn't expect the company to get too big, too quickly: "We've been growing really aggressively for a number of years and growth is difficult to manage well. So the real magic right now is balancing the opportunities that are in front of us with making sure we keep the culture the way we want it, and that we make it a fun, good place to work. When you're growing really fast it can be tough on everybody and it can hurt the creative process. So we want to be careful about it and make sure the games come first."

" WE THINK A GREAT ADVENTURE GAME COULD GO ALONGSIDE A GREAT FPS OR A GREAT RTS, SOMETHING LIKE THAT "



■ "Making smaller games is just as hard, if not harder, than making large games, and we knew it was its own challenge," Bruner says of the company's founding philosophy. "We didn't approach episodic as 'business as usual' cut into smaller pieces. We built the studio from day one to solve this problem and approached it with a clean slate."

As for what those games will be, more *Walking Dead* episodes are already in the works and a series based on Bill Willingham's *Fables* is almost ready for prime time. The studio also has an ace up its sleeve: a one-off game that will be unveiled this month. Beyond this, nothing's definite yet, but not for lack of choices. "There are television shows that we would love to do, and some film IP. And then there's game IP as well – we've done *Sam & Max* and *Monkey Island*, but there are bigger game IP out there and we think a great adventure game could go alongside a great FPS or a great RTS, or something like that," teases Bruner. "That's one of the joys of what we've done here, it's kind of… I wouldn't say 'reviving' so much as 'evolving' narrative-based gaming and this kind of role-playing to a state where people can envision games based on other IP a lot more easily than they could have before. The credibility of things like BAFTAs and the VGAs gets us into conversations that we wouldn't have been in two or three years ago, so it's a really exciting time. The challenge is deciding what the next couple we're going to commit to will be, and which ones we're going to have to say no to or push out."

With so many possibilities, will old favourites like *Sam & Max* or *Monkey Island* get left behind? "We've never had an over-the-top success like *The Walking Dead* before, so it's an all-new world for us in terms of what happens when you have so many millions of people playing a game, instead of hundreds of thousands," Bruner says. "As far as *Monkey Island*, that's still a LucasArts property and Lucasfilm is now owned by Disney. So that becomes complicated. But we absolutely adore *Sam & Max*; I don't think you'd ever see us abandon *Sam & Max*. What we would want to do is figure out how to make a *Sam & Max* game that works for everybody, and that's a lot easier said than done. I think [we figured it out] with *The Walking Dead*, but now that we have one example that doesn't mean that you slap *Sam & Max* into it and everything works. But [now] we understand some of the problems and solutions and we can apply them. It's ironic… it's probably not what adventure gamers per se want to hear, but working on these



THE CHOICE TO GO 'ALL IN'

■ "Before *The Walking Dead* came out, we decided that the game was going to be about choice. There weren't going to be a lot of puzzles or inventory management, we weren't going to count the number of zombies you killed. It was a big risk, but we were really committed to it," Bruner says. Elements like the notifications that tip you off when a choice has been made, and the stats screens that tally up your choices at the end of each episode, are a big part of why *The Walking Dead* works. "It's kind of a catch-22: if we get really good at writing really slick interactive stories – if the machinery of what's running behind the story to make it adapt to your experience gets too refined – then it's just like you're playing this really great story. I think it's important that people understand where their agency with the story is and where they can branch, and that kind of goes in opposition to telling stories very elegantly and very seamlessly," explains Bruner. "So we're definitely working with user interface tools, like the pop-ups that say 'Clem will remember that' – that's to help people understand that these are elements that are contributing to their story experience." As successful as *The Walking Dead*'s choice-driven gameplay turned out to be, however, Bruner says this won't be Telltale's only modus operandi from now on: "We'll take the best of what we've learned and continue to try to refine it."



■ "The thing that's special about the BAFTAs is it's an industry award that's bigger than the games industry," Bruner says of *The Walking Dead*'s recent win. "They're an entertainment industry award, and we don't have an entertainment industry-wide award in the US that's akin to the BAFTAs. So it's unique and extra special to us to have been nominated for the BAFTAs, and to have actually won."

bigger, more successful games really empowers us on how to make more successful *Sam & Max* games. So it's ultimately a win for everybody; it just requires patience and diligence, and working as fast as we can."

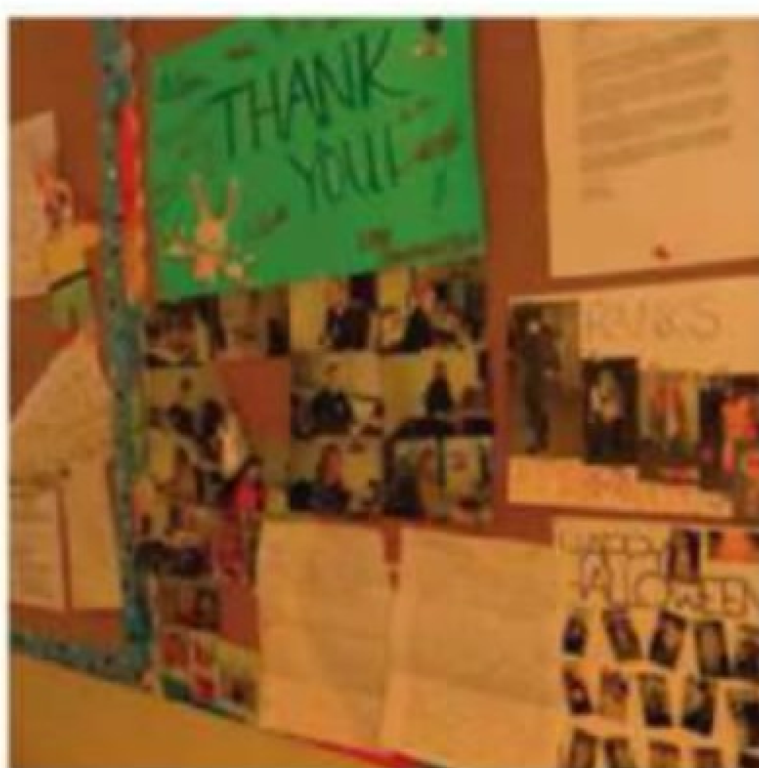
He points out that Telltale's not the first studio to face this problem: "How do we do the giant blockbuster IPs and still be able to do some of the smaller things that we love? That was a LucasArts problem as well; how do you do *Star Wars* and *Monkey Island* at the same time? There were a number of years where Lucas was really successful doing big and small IP, and those were the years that Dan and I were there. We can take some lessons we learned there and figure out how to do it here. The problem is, we want to do it all.

"We either have to pick and choose or we have to get bigger. We have a nice shiny building that will help us get bigger, and until we're big enough we'll just make the choices that seem best creatively and for the business at large." In light of Lucasfilm's recent acquisition, Bruner's comparison begs the question: is Telltale headed down that road?

"Long term, we like the idea of being an entertainment company – bigger than just a game company – and our games have gotten more casual and have moved into this more 'interactive entertainment' experience. That's where our ambitions lie and we definitely think the best way to pursue that is independently right now," says Bruner. "If a company like Disney came to us and said, 'We share that vision and want to embrace it and partner moving forward,' I'd say that Disney's a giant company with a lot of resources available – we're not so fiercely independent that we would never partner with anybody. I mean, every game we've ever done has been a partnership with somebody. But we do have a really strong vision about what we want a Telltale game to be, and right now the only opportunity we see to do that is independently."

With the games industry paying closer attention to the television-style model, the greater entertainment industry looks to be Telltale's next target. "Certainly the next generation of consoles are about more than just gaming. The first thing you turn on when you go home is going to be your console for watching movies, watching TV, playing games… everything. And we think our type of stories fit into that world really organically," Bruner says, adding confidently, "[We want] to figure out what this next generation of digital entertainment is. Is it videogaming, is it passive television watching, is it browsing the internet, is it some hybrid of all of that? We want to be where the action is and we feel like we're on the bleeding edge of it right now." So take that, marketplace realities.

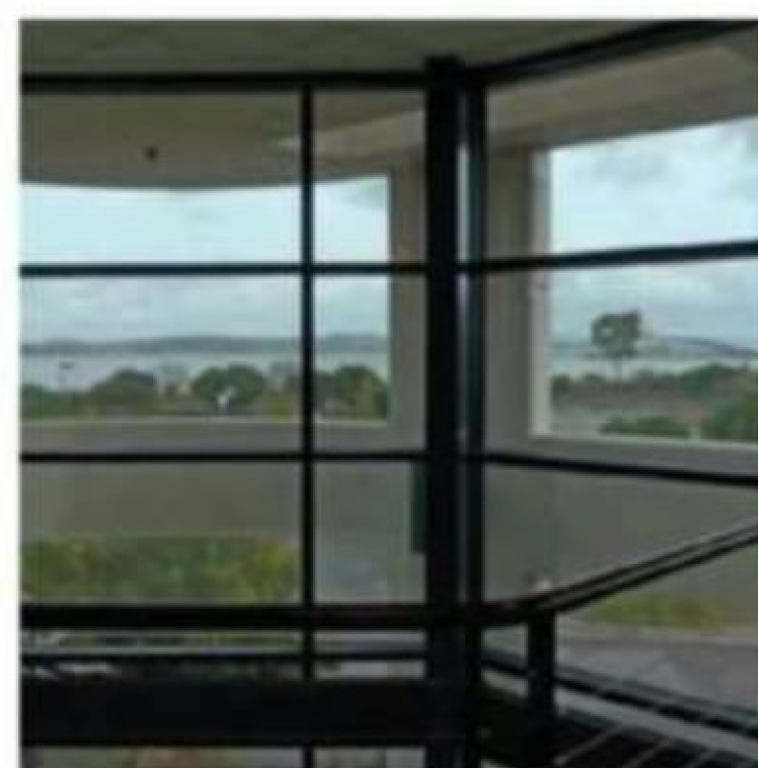
■ "Different departments are working a lot more independently, in a good way, but you don't feel like everybody's bailing water in the same boat trying to make it to the other side the way that you do when you're a smaller company."



■ "We've been a smaller stuff studio for a long time; now we're a big stuff studio, and we want to become a big and small stuff studio. That's the next crank we have to turn," Bruner tells games™ on the eve of Telltale moving offices.



■ "How do we do *Sam & Max* and the next giant Hollywood movie at the same time?" Bruner wonders. "It's very much like LucasArts. There were people who loved to work on *Star Wars* and people who loved to work on the smaller stuff."





UNCHARTED TERRITORY

ZOMBIES. DEATH. THE APOCALYPSE. GAMES™ EXPLORES THE MATURE THEMES OF THE LAST OF US AS NAUGHTY DOG LEAVES THE WISECRACKS AT HOME AND VENTURES TO DARKER PLACES

Naughty Dog has found itself in a precarious position as the PlayStation 3 cycle reaches its conclusion. Once again armed with a brand new IP, the studio is preparing to step out of the shadow cast by Nathan Drake and move into uncharted territory with *The Last Of Us*.

Moving further from its platforming roots than ever before, Naughty Dog is taking players into an apocalyptic world in an attempt to bridge the ailing gap between blockbuster cinema and triple-A videogames. Over recent years, the industry has cemented the unique common creative ground shared by film and videogames, and developers continue to wrestle with the balance between interaction and storytelling.

We've seen it work to varying degrees of success. Immersing themselves further into the narrative, developers often have to make sacrifices. Sadly, it's usually gameplay that receives the short end of the stick, with 'cinematic game' often translating to 'interactive movie' in reality – more *Dragon's Lair* than synergetic masterpiece.

Quantic Dreams' *Heavy Rain* delivered an unparalleled crime thriller much in the vein of David Fincher's *Seven*, though struggled with letting players have control of its characters in the rich world David Cage envisioned. *Uncharted* faced similar problems. While capturing the pulpy, Saturday matinee majesty of the *Indiana Jones* franchise is a success in itself, the strong emphasis on popcorn-friendly cinematics is a thematically safe bet compared to the subject matter explored in *The Last Of Us*.

This is Naughty Dog's attempt at a more mature story. It's certainly an exciting prospect for the studio, as it looks to step outside of its comfort zone to push genre expectations as it has done so many times in the past. The Santa Monica-based studio is still a slave to creating story-driven action games, but *The Last Of Us* is ditching the cheeky smirk in favour of a desperate weariness.



GAME DESIGNER RICKY CAMBIER

Speaking with game designer Ricky Cambier, it's easy to see the shift in influence between *Uncharted* and the studio's brand-new IP: "We looked at a lot, both in fiction and in non-fiction. We got some influence from *No Country For Old Men* – just tonally some of the look and desperation in that story. We were [also] influenced by stories about the plague and how it devastated society and, of course, we've talked [in the past] about the *Planet Earth* series, which has been a central role in influencing the game."

It is hard to imagine a world where *Planet Earth* and *No Country For Old Men* combine, but *The Last Of Us* is set in the aftermath of a different kind of disaster. Picking up two decades after a cordyceps fungus has spread across the globe killing millions, nature is slowly regaining its foothold in Earth's cities. While it sounds supernatural, it's actually a story born out of reality, with Naughty Dog directly influenced by the 'Jungles' episode of *Planet Earth*.

"The starting-off point was something grounded in the natural world, that this cordyceps fungus is real. This cordyceps fungus exists in insects and it takes over their mind. So to explore that in a way that's plausible I think makes it kind of exciting," claimed Cambier. While in reality the fungus only attacks insects, *The Last Of Us* explores the idea of it spreading to humans and the destructive impact this would have on society – much like the Black Death that ripped Europe apart in the 14th Century.

It's in this world where we are set to explore a story of desperation, survival and family. That, again, might be an odd combination of themes, but as we get a first glimpse of Joel and Ellie – the central duo that the story pivots around – it quickly becomes apparent that this isn't your standard kind of adventure.

"You've got some things that are kind of obvious, like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," Cambier said on the team's influences. "You have another story about a father watching over this child and taking them to this post-apocalyptic world; you look at the relationship they develop, and you kind of see the tones there and what it takes to survive."





"LEAVE IT TO YOUR IMAGINATION – HOW THE INFLUENCES JOEL IS GOING TO HAVE ON ELLIE VERSUS THE INFLUENCE ELLIE IS GOING TO HAVE ON JOEL"

The world of *The Last Of Us* is crumbling. The last bastions of humanity are packed into quarantined zones, safe from the infected and bandits that wander the wider planes of America. The zones themselves are falling prey to paranoia; the United States military has enacted a martial law for rigorous screening and, as the population continues to dwindle, mankind's future is at serious risk. While they aren't related by blood, 14-year-old Ellie is cast onto Joel like a daughter, who's entrusted with getting her out of the oppressive quarantine zone and to a new haven before it's too late – though the troubling remnants of the old word await, along with its infected former civilians.





■ THE WORLD HAS BEEN COMPLETELY RAVAGED BY NATURE'S FURY. IT DOES LOOK FANTASTIC, BUT ONE LOOK AT THE DECIMATED INFECTED AND THE HARSH REALITY OF THE SITUATION COMES INTO FOCUS.

The lights are dimmed as we prepare to experience *The Last Of Us* for the first time. Our pre-game orientation consists of one note from the developer: this is not *Uncharted*. Indeed, after 30 seconds of gameplay that statement rings true; Joel makes his first steps into the desolate downtown streets of Boston scorched by nature and into the decaying ruins of a toppled office block.

It's striking just how beautiful *The Last Of Us* is, completely removed from the vast deserts and gorgeous jungles of *Uncharted* and *Crash Bandicoot*. An eerie threat looms across the horizon; nature's harsh beauty is a staggering juxtaposition when you come to understand what horrors await each and every shadow.

The unfettered ambition of the studio is evident, even without the boon of debuting on





■ Naughty Dog has developed a dynamic AI system called the 'balance of power' that turns the heat up in combat when Joel starts to lose control of a situation. When the chamber clicks empty, don't be surprised to hear Ellie screaming in fear from the distance.





Sony's recently announced PlayStation 4. In fact, for designer Ricky Cambier, the idea of withholding the project for future hardware wasn't even considered.

"It is towards the end [of the console cycle], but we are still pushing the hardware," he said. "We bring that clear to the players and to the expectation that the PS3 is still an exceptional piece of hardware. Even at this stage, we are still finding new ways to push it. I think we benefit from that." He added, "It's just kind of fun to look for ways that we will take the tech of the hardware and take the needs of the game, and look for ways we can push [the hardware]… push it in ways that we are still not seeing in the games industry.

"I think we look towards things, even simple things, when we start to explore a world like this. When we know it's a world where there's no power, one thing we have to look at is 'how do we light the environments?' So we set out to do things like rewrite the entire lighting engine, which is going to allow us to get a far different look to any other Naughty Dog game you're ever going to see out there."

The initial beauty of Boston catches you off guard before the sheer scale begins to fall into place. The rain dominates the senses with the sound of water crashing down on the abandoned streets, tip-tapping on the cars and trickling through the open windows in the office block. The uneasy comfort is broken by an oppressive shuffling from floors above.

It's with the introduction of enemies – and, by proxy, the combat – that perhaps the only comparisons to the *Uncharted* series rear their heads. The approach is classic Naughty Dog – over-the-shoulder shooting, frantic melee and an eye for environmental traversal – but it's completely stripped back. As the infected come into play (we only see two forms in our demo: Runners and Clickers) we only wish we had more of the skills at Mr Drake's disposal. To put it another way, *The Last Of Us* is a



AN EPIC JOURNEY

■ Neil Druckmann has gone on record to claim that *The Last Of Us* will be Naughty Dog's longest game to date. While more of a great thing is welcome news, we all know that heavily scripted games run the risk of becoming long in the tooth. Ricky Cambier thinks this will be a journey worth taking: "That comes down to the relationships you're going to have, specifically with Joel and Ellie, [but also] through everyone else that you're going to meet. And as you continue to explore these relationships, you'll spend time with these different characters and you have to overcome things… we just found that tended to take more game time than we had anticipated."



CORDYCEPS: ATTACK OF THE KILLER FUNGI

Like every other facet of The Last Of Us, Naughty Dog sought to ground its tale in the real world. That included the disease that has ravaged the population of Earth: Ophiocordyceps unilateralis, an astonishing, frightening and truly curious parasitic fungus that exists in our own natural world. We trace the journey of the real-world parasite, gaining some clues as to how it will terrorise the survivors of The Last Of Us

STEP 1: INFILTRATION

■ Airborne spores spread the initial neuroparasite, latching itself to a host before it begins infiltrating the central nervous system. It will then direct the host towards a densely populated area, securing further deliverance and widespread infection of the organism.

STEP 2: DEATH

■ While the host will live under the influence of the fungus for some time – causing involuntary movement and extreme convulsions – eventually the parasite will sap its working organs and tissue, ultimately killing the host.

STEP 3: CONTAGION

■ Now a lifeless husk, a fruiting body begins to penetrate the skull, sprouting as a fungus through the top of the head and one again passing airborne spores into the environment. Organisms within radius are susceptible to the contagion, causing widespread casualties.

distressing and frightening world, and the combat only serves to highlight this.

"You'll notice that *The Last Of Us* is going to be Naughty Dog's first M-rated game, and that speaks to some of the content that we have decided to explore," claimed Cambier, when quizzed on the frightening aspects of his studio's newest creation. "When we set off we knew we wanted to explore that. We didn't know exactly where that was going to go – we had some ideas – and when you start to get there you realise, yes, in order to fully tell this story we are going to have to go some to dark places. Because when you look at the expectations of a fall of society/fall of man story, you realise there are going to be some people that are going to struggle. It's going to be very difficult, and the choices they make are going to be very different from the choices they would make today."



While Ellie can assist in combat when things get a bit too overwhelming, she doesn't particularly like getting her hands dirty.

When a Runner makes a break for you, it's clear humanity has run out of choices. Runners are humans in early stages of infection – they can see and hear you, but have gone completely feral. Once they charge they'll start throwing a flurry of punches and, unless you take one down quickly, the noise will quickly attract packs of enemies that easily overwhelm.

The fights are brutal and unforgiving encounters, with Joel having to utilise resources around him. Ammo is scarce, so bricks and makeshift shivs take the form of weaponry. You can combine enough rags and blades to form the latter, though the former is in abundance as everything crumbles around you.

Driving a brick into the face of a Runner for the first time is an uneasy experience. Its face warps, the brick crumbles and blood splatters across Joel's hands, while Ellie looks on in despair. The context of this violence provokes an unsettling feeling, without a doubt. The brick has but a few hits before it's gone, so taking on multiple enemies is out of the question. Even the shiv has only three uses before it's blunt beyond repair, and those same rags you used to create the expendable weapon could have been used to create a bandage for healing in combat. The sparse resources create a dynamic system of choice and retribution – do you weigh combat options against survival?

While Joel does have guns at his disposal, and they certainly pack a punch, the familiar reliance of over-the-shoulder shooting is misleading. Gunshots, even to the head, rarely cause death. The aiming is heavier and more sluggish than that of *Uncharted*'s, and as the Clickers get introduced, noise really becomes your enemy.

Clickers use sound to scan their surroundings, emitting a sharp rapping noise that can pinpoint Joel's location – and scare the hell out of us as we attempt to explore the derelict environments. The cordyceps fungus has corrupted and overwhelmed its host, exploding out of their faces in a blossom of horror and completely blinding the host. When attracting a pack of enemies Joel will quickly find death; in fact, just one Clicker among the chaos will lead to almost instant death, as their snapping jaws look to close around your neck.

> "[Ellie's] also a 14-year-old girl – she's going to surprise you, but you'll need to help her out at times"

Thankfully, Joel has his own sixth sense, of sorts, to guide Ellie through the horror. From years of smuggling weapons and items through the wastelands, Joel can crouch down and take account of his surroundings. Enemy locations will roughly appear in front of him and through scenery, but success often relies on breaking cover to take down the infected singularly before situations get out of hand. Bottles or bricks can be thrown to draw enemies away, though situations can quickly turn into heart-stopping desperate encounters for your life. The first time we went up against more than one enemy we were shocked at how much we struggled. We frantically shivved and smashed our way through anything in sight, while Ellie whimpered in some hidden shadow. It's enough to force you to take pause and catch your breath.

With a 14-year-old girl by your side, bludgeoning and marauding your way through the infected may not seem like the best course of action, but our first introduction to Ellie shows she's hardened by the world around her. She plays an integral role throughout *The Last Of Us*, helping Joel by scurrying up toward unreachable ledges and traversing



Little has been said about how exactly the virus has spread through the world of The Last Of Us, but screenshots reveal survivors braving the wilderness in gas masks.



■ It might be the end of the console generation, but Naughty Dog's latest is easily looking the best in its expansive portfolio.

> "We are drawing on our history of being a successful action developer and weaving in those elements of a dark and gritty world"

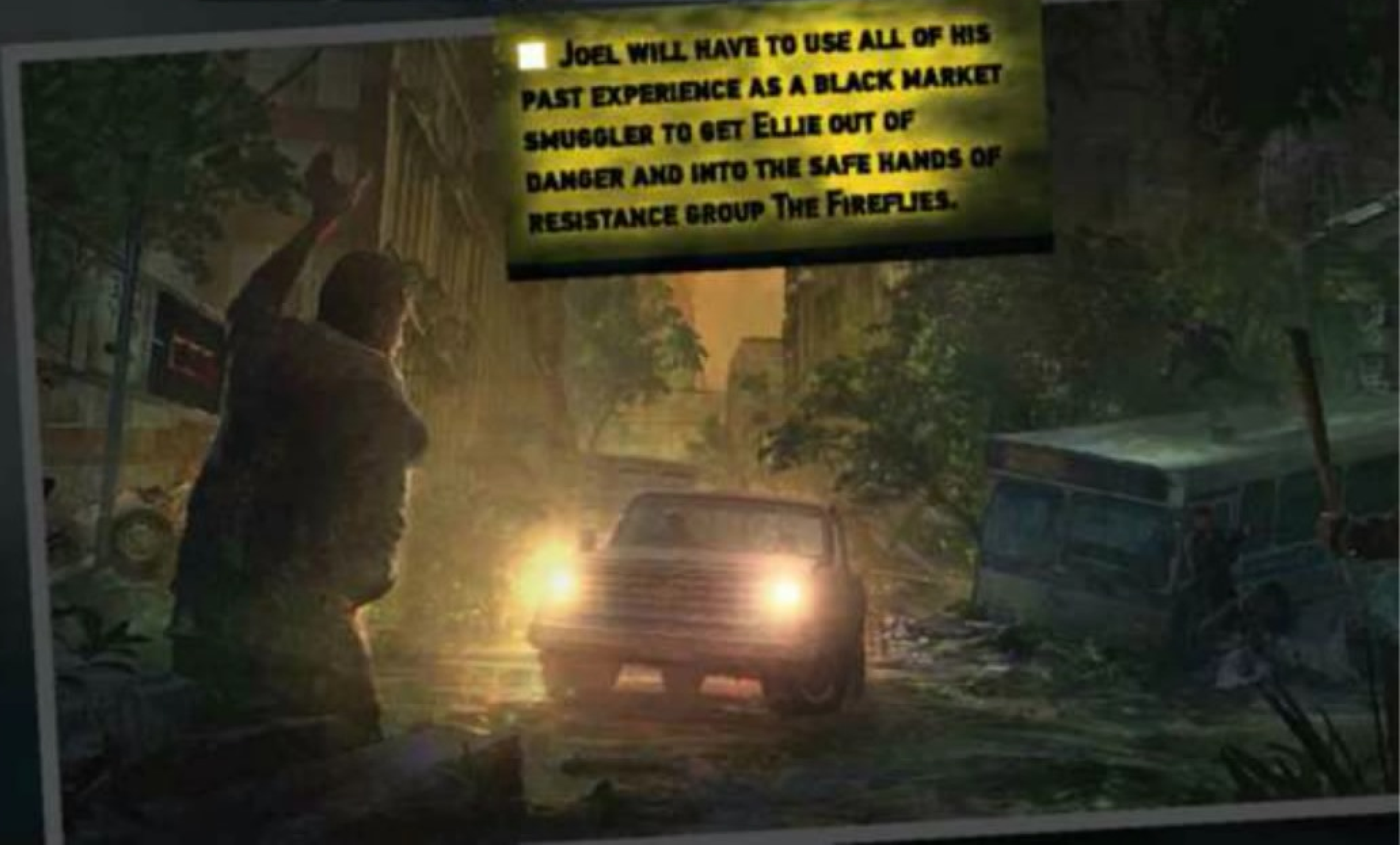
environments that are only fit for a child. Of course, it isn't long before the player extends emotions out to Ellie, which makes these necessary excursions all the more difficult. Naughty Dog was very anxious to make sure Ellie didn't turn into a character you'd have to escort across the city; instead she interacts independently, with some of the most impressively reactive AI we've witnessed.





"We know it's about building the relationship, so there are the story goals at all times, knowing that you wanted someone that you can count on like a partner," said Cambier on what makes Ellie work in the context of this world. "And when that starts, you don't really know what she's capable of, so you get to explore where that goes… We are all familiar with having to escort companions and them taking you out of the game. We knew that it was a very explicit goal to make sure she felt like someone who was with you and could take care of herself at times, but she's also vulnerable in this world.

"Ellie is somebody that has only known this world, so she has a little bit of a different perspective on it, and she's also a 14-year-old-girl – she's going to surprise you, but you'll need to help her out at times, too." Though Cambier was careful to emphasise how much work the developer has put into the character and AI, he made a big point about the attempt to take it away from the typical escort missions that have plagued games like *GoldenEye* in the past. In fact, when we asked Cambier what concerns Naughty Dog had with players seeing Ellie interacting independently in the world for the first time, there was a clear answer: "Escort missions, for sure, because that comes with a sense of burden. And I think we definitely have spent a lot of time making it feel like she's not [a burden]. She's an asset."



■ Joel will have to use all of his past experience as a black market smuggler to get Ellie out of danger and into the safe hands of resistance group The Fireflies.

In this world you really do need all the help you can get. While it wasn't wholly demonstrated in our demo, Ellie is able to get around a little easier than Joel (small frame and all), meaning she can open up new pathways and scout for ammunition. Our playthrough was set around an hour from the outset of the game, so we didn't get a chance to see this in motion – nor did we get to see her get involved in the combat. In the past, Naughty Dog has shown in walkthroughs how Ellie will get involved in combat if Joel gets overwhelmed, though seeing a small girl forced into a situation where she has to kill an infected or a bandit isn't pretty.

While cautiously scaling the office tower, clearing rooms and scavenging for items (finding shotguns sans ammo), it's pretty easy to start to build a picture of what Naughty Dog wants *The Last Of Us* to be. The studio is dedicated to the pursuit of story-driven games, and with this new IP it looks like it is closer than ever before to bridging the gap between cinema and gaming. *The Last Of Us* is incredibly cinematic, but not at the expense of the gameplay, which in itself is forging an entirely new experience.

We would hesitate to brand this as 'survival horror'. While not entirely divorced from the *Resident Evils* and *Silent Hills* of this world, it doesn't rely on cheap scare tactics to get you on edge – it's through perfectly crafted tension, excellent sound design and horrifically visceral combat. Naughty Dog has taken to calling it 'action survival', Cambier tells us, something that we are inclined to agree with. "There are some horror elements, some survival elements and there are still some action elements. So we are drawing on our history of being a successful action developer and weaving in those elements of a dark and gritty world."

While the demo we played may have focused on combat and enemies – giving us a first taste of what to expect – we can't escape the urge of exploration that fills our hearts for a Naughty Dog game. Boston looks incredible, and as the buildings rumble, shake and crumble as you try to pass through undetected, we just know this is a place we can't wait to waste hours away in.

As we made it back onto the city streets and out into the open, away from the whispers and hushed tones used throughout the shadows, we get a taste of the classic Naughty Dog writing – suffice to say that Joel may not have Drake's smirk, but he certainly has a flavour of his wit about him. Coupled with fantastic motion capture, it's surprising how accomplished *The Last Of Us* is with its cinematic grasp. David Cage doubts the power to bring Hollywood-blockbuster emotion to current technology, but Naughty Dog's confidence is close to realising that ambition.

After a brief puzzle section, we eventually find ourselves in a dead end, just as the sound of footsteps and clicking echoes all around us. What follows is a frantic rush to get off the streets as the infected swarm the position. Low on ammo and weapons, we are pushed to desperately haul open a garage door, and as Joel scrapes under with the first enemy but a breath away, the title card silently emerges to herald the end of our playthrough.



Now due for release in June, *The Last Of Us* is a dark and gritty vision of a planet on the brink of splitting at the seams – it's worlds away from what you've come to expect from a Naughty Dog adventure, but a fitting last hurrah for Sony's moribund hardware.





MOCAPPING THE WAY FORWARD

CREATING A CINEMATIC experience isn't as easy as throwing some extra money into CGI; studios like Naughty Dog structure themselves almost like a movie studio. With on-site motion capture studios, directors and producers are all at hand to create the experience – but does this affect the way the game is designed? Ricky Cambier says it's the opposite: "I wouldn't say that it affects how we design the game... more that the mocap influences some of the characters as you start to work with actors like Troy Baker (Joel) and Ashley Johnson (Ellie); they start to bring their own influences into the characters, into the world – just like each designer, each artist and sound designer adds their own influence, and you start to get their voice a little bit. I'd say the mocap lends itself to that. Neil [Druckmann] is there working with them, directing them, trying different things in the same way we playtest many ideas. You get a scene together, and you work with an actor and you see what works, and you start to steadily massage it. The actor has ideas or you start to see where the scene wants to go. I'd say it's much more influenced by the subtleties of the scene as opposed to influencing the overall design."

25 IMPORTANT IMPORTS THAT NEVER MADE IT TO EUROPE

You might think that import gaming was just a fad – something that died out when money-hungry publishers started to localise anything and everything in search of slightly higher margins. But you'd be wrong. Even today, when games like Lollipop Chainsaw and Valkyria Chronicles somehow manage to escape Japan, there are a frankly criminal number of games that don't get the chance to entertain a global audience. But where there's a will, there's a way – here are just a handful of the great games you'll have missed out on if you haven't gone out of your way to sample all that gaming has to offer…



Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan (JPN)

Format: DS **Year:** 2005 **Expect To Pay:** £20-30

■ SURE, *OUENDAN sort of* got a Western release in the form of *Elite Beat Agents*, but anyone who has played the Japanese original will be able to tell you just how much more entertaining it is than the localisation. The bonkers short stories that pan out in the background of each song are, if anything, better if you can't understand them. The J-rock craziness fits the look and feel of the game far better than *EBA*'s soundtrack, which brought together the unholy trinity of Madonna, Jamiroquai and Avril Lavigne for the first (and hopefully last) time. It'll work on any DS too, handily, so run along and get your import on.



DJ Max Portable 3 (US)

Format: PSP **Year:** 2010 **Expect To Pay:** £10-15

■ **HARDCORE RHYTHM-ACTION fans might point out that this isn't perhaps the best game in the franchise. But given that it's the only one that got a US release, it's far easier to recommend from a pricing point of view. This is as traditional as rhythm-action gets, but don't be put off by the simple presentation; a host of customisation options let you tailor the difficulty level, plus various modes incorporate more and more buttons to really get your hands dancing. If you think you've got skills when it comes to music games, let this overlooked gem be the judge.**





Chain Dive (JPN)

Format: PS2 **Year:** 2003 **Expect To Pay:** £15-20

THIS 2.5D ODDITY is the exclusive invite-only party of the article; it's so far off the radar that without being tipped off about it, you'd have no idea that it had even happened. A hyperspeed platformer of sorts, *Chain Dive* sees you traversing levels using grapple points and freezing foes with melee strikes in order to fling yourself off them as well, smashing them in the process. It's confusing and slow at first, but, much like *Bangai-O*, it's immensely satisfying (not to mention dumbfounding for casual observers) once you fall into its unique rhythm. You may not have heard of it before, but by the time you're clearing entire levels without touching the ground, you'll be glad you did.





Hey You, Pikachu! (US)

Format: N64 **Year:** 2000 **Expect To Pay:** £30-50

OKAY, SO IN a world where fridges and phones can understand every word you say, this rudimentary early step into voice-controlled gaming might not be that impressive. It's not even much of a game, if we're honest – more a fascinating little piece of history, one that commands crazy prices for full, like-new boxed copies with the bundled microphone. Our enduring memory of the game is having to put on a pathetic excuse for an American accent just to get the little yellow bugger to pay any attention to us. And hey, if nothing else, it's good to know that it's not just Kinect that's hard of hearing.







EX Troopers (JPN)

Format: PS3/3DS **Year:** 2012 **Expect To Pay:** £25-35

THIS ANIME-STYLED *Lost Planet* spin-off only launched at the tail end of last year, but Capcom has already ruled out any chance of a Western release; sadly, the in-game speech bubbles are art assets rather than text boxes, so localisation (which was never planned from the start) would be a huge undertaking and involve redoing a huge amount of the assets from scratch. It's a real shame, too. While *Lost Planet 3* sets its sights on more traditional third-person shooter territory, *EX Troopers* is an evolution of the co-op focus seen in the sorely underappreciated second game. The PS3 version is naturally region-free, so shoot for that one unless you have a Japanese 3DS.

"THIS BEAUTIFUL ACTION RPG REALLY MADE THE SUPER FAMICOM SING AND STILL HOLDS UP BRILLIANTLY TODAY"





Seiken Densetsu 3 (JPN)

Format: SNES **Year:** 1995 **Expect To Pay:** £40-60

WE'VE TRIED TO keep this list as current and relevant to modern gamers as possible, but when there's a sequel to *Secret Of Mana* out there and many gamers don't even know about it, it's kind of our duty to inform. A beautiful action RPG from Square's 16-bit heyday, *Seiken Densetsu 3* really made the Super Famicom sing and still holds up brilliantly today. There's even a surprisingly good fan translation out there to play it in English. We'd remind you that you legally need to own the game to download and patch the ROM in order to do this, but that'd just be as annoying as that damn 'For Your Consideration' message that keeps popping up during our copy of *The Hobbit*.





Otomedius Excellent (US)

Format: Xbox 360 **Year:** 2011 **Expect To Pay:** £5-10

■ **KONAMI ONCE RULED the arcades with its awesome shooters; but ever since consoles sidelined the coin-op market, that image has long been forgotten. Sublime PS2 shooter *Gradius V* did its best to remind the world of this former glory, but was ultimately played by about eight people – although that hasn't stopped the Japanese firm chasing the dream with this spiritual successor to *Parodius*. The Japan-only original was pretty horrible, but this sequel (which somehow got a US release) fixed a lot of the problems. And has slightly fewer jiggly anime schoolgirls. Whether that's a good or a bad thing is entirely up to you.**



Pop'n Music (JPN)

Format: Dreamcast **Year:** 1999
Expect To Pay: £60-80

■ **BEFORE YOU BAULK at that price, bear in mind that it includes the bespoke nine-button controller; while the frantic rhythm-action game can be played without it, it's kind of like playing *Guitar Hero* using a standard controller (read: largely pointless). Looking more like a toddler's plaything than an input device, the controller itself is a hardcore badge of honour. But it's more than that, too, as anyone who has enjoyed the panic of slapping the oversized buttons in time with the nonsensically infectious soundtrack will tell you. They don't make rhythm-action games like they used to. They literally just don't.**









Initial D: Street Stage (JPN)

Format: PSP **Year**: 2006 **Expect To Pay:** £20-25

■ WE'RE GLAD THE *Initial D* franchise exists, if only because the horrific/brilliant (we're still not sure) Eurobeat soundtrack is incredible. They're really strong arcade racing games, too. Harking back to the early days of arcade driving – when *Ridge Racer* was still a name to beat as opposed to one to be plastered across the box of any old tat – it's simple, no-frills racing and it still works as well as it did back in the day. Based on Version 3 of the arcade machine, this handheld port supersedes the (also brilliant) PS2 version and, as far as portable arcade translations go, we'd struggle to point out many that do a better job.

> "IT'S SIMPLE, NO-FRILLS RACING AND IT STILL WORKS AS WELL AS IT DID BACK IN THE DAYS OF RIDGE RACER"





Monster Hunter Portable 3rd (JPN)

Format: PSP/PS3 **Year:** 2010 **Expect To Pay:** £20-30

■ ALTHOUGH SOME OF the content of *Portable 3rd* has now appeared in the 3DS/Wii U update to *Monster Hunter Tri*, there's still a lot more hunting to be done on PSP. PS3 owners can even take the hunt online by using Adhoc Party to trick the handheld into thinking that lobbies full of online players are actually right next to you, making four-player hunts – the real meat of the franchise – far more accessible than they might otherwise be on an import-only game. Linguists and *Monster Hunter* veterans alike will be able to circumvent the language barrier and enjoy this, perhaps the best version of *Monster Hunter* available. There's even an HD port on PS3.





Contra 4 (US)

Format: DS **Year:** 2007
Expect To Pay: £10-15

■ **THE GAME THAT presented WayForward as a hugely capable studio, far better than its Nickelodeon-laced back catalogue would suggest. Effectively a love letter to the franchise that caused many temper tantrums and controller breakages in console gaming's formative years, this side-scrolling shooter riffs on so many memorable moments from the series' history that it's impossible to know where to begin. Retro fans *need* a copy of this – the superb modern twist on the format made all the sweeter by the inclusion of the original game. Y'know, in case you need to remind yourself that you're just as terrible at it now as you were then.**



Mr Driller: Drill Land (JPN)

Format: GameCube **Year:** 2003 **Expect To Pay:** £20-30

■ IT SEEMS A little off to be recommending an obscure variant of a game so commonly available in English, but hear us out. *Drill Land* moves the puzzle action to a theme park setting, each 'ride' taking the form of a clever twist on the formula. One of the five modes is like a Disneyland-flavoured version of the norm, but the others are where the admission price goes: there's a horror-themed mode that involves ghost hunting, an Indiana Jones-style adventure, an anything-goes outer space variant and, best of all, an action-RPG take on drilling that's like nothing you've ever played before.



Ryū Ga Gotoku Kenzan! (JPN)

Format: PS3 **Year:** 2008 **Expect To Pay:** £25-35

■ CONSIDERING THAT SEGA is surprisingly forthcoming with localised versions of the *Yakuza* series, it seems a little strange that this spin-off never made the jump. Ditching the modern-day setting and established characters of the franchise in favour of an Edo-period Japan backdrop and a fictionalisation of famed ronin Miyamoto Musashi, it's clearly a game aimed at the Japanese market, but one with at least as much to offer the West as any of the 2,491 *Dynasty Warriors* games that come out every year. Good luck breaking down the language barrier if your Japanese isn't up to snuff, though.



Aquanaut's Holiday: Hidden Memories (CHI)

Format: PS3 **Year:** 2008 **Expect To Pay:** £70-100

■ THIS SEDATE ASIA-only underwater adventure is already changing hands for silly money. More an experience than a traditional game, it's easy to kill hours just chatting to fish and photographing submerged curiosities. It still looks awesome some five years on (which is more than can be said for a lot of other games the same age) and if you see a copy for sale, we'd advise you to pick it up if you can afford it; not only is it uniquely brilliant, the price hasn't stopped rising since the day of release.

Baten Kaitos Origins (US)

Format: GameCube **Year:** 2006 **Expect To Pay:** £30-40

■ QUITE HOW A sequel to the bizarre card-based RPG was ever deemed commercially viable is anyone's guess. But whether it was a hilarious joke on someone's last day or a well-meaning yet naive notion that this kind of game could ever escape niche appeal, we're glad it happened. The card mechanics permeated the experience to an even greater degree than in the original and even with titles like *Kingdom Hearts: Chain Of Memories* singing from the same hymn sheet, there's still nothing out there quite like this. Time to bust out the dusty old FreeLoader, then.





VISA GRANTED... SOMEHOW
The oddities that did manage to sneak into the country

Mr Moskeeto (PS2, 2002)



■ Part of Eidos's welcome 'Fresh Games' initiative to bring more Japanese titles to the West, this odd little thing put players in control of a needle-nosed nuisance out for blood.

Doshin The Giant (GC, 2002)



■ Play as a friendly yellow giant with what is either a gross belly button or a tiny penis, befriend islanders to earn their love, then transform into Yashin and raze their homes. Riiight.

We Love Katamari (PS2, 2005)



■ Despite the fact that the original roll-'em-up never made it to Europe, this improved sequel and most of the later games did. Now everyone can roll up all manner of junk and fire it into space, because reasons.





Captain Rainbow (JPN)

Format: Wii **Year:** 2008 **Expect To Pay:** £20-25

FROM THE MAKER of *Chibi-Robo* comes this daft tale of a washed-up superhero sent to an island where forgotten characters from Nintendo's past are put out to pasture. Many of the cameos will fly over the heads of Western gamers, but some – like Birdo and *Punch-Out!!*'s Little Mac – should raise a smile. Wandering the island and befriending a bunch of has-beens might not sound exciting, but developer Skip somehow manages to make the seemingly mundane surprisingly good fun, even if the humour is a bit coarser than in its other games.

Ibara (JPN)

Format: PS2 **Year:** 2006 **Expect To Pay:** £90-110

YEAH, SO YOU can get other Cave shooters for a fraction of the price on your phone. Well done you. But this one is widely considered to be one of the studio's best and is certainly its most challenging – the PS2 port removes some of the arcade version's slowdown, making it notably more punishing. It's a lot to fork out (especially when you consider that the arcade PCB can be picked up for just a couple of notes more) and some have complained about image quality, but if you want something to prove that you *really* love shooters, this spiritual successor to 8ing's *Battle Garegga* is just the medal you've been looking for.







EarthBound (US)

Format: SNES **Year:** 1995 **Expect To Pay:** £200-300

BY FAR THE most expensive item here, this cult RPG was thrust into the limelight when its characters and locations popped up in the *Smash Bros* series. Constantly denied a European launch (or even a digital reissue), it's one of the few classic 16-bit games that can't be played today outside of owning the original or emulation. Japan-only GBA sequel *Mother 3* also deserves a mention; these are brilliant games if you can find them for slightly less than the current ludicrous asking prices.



Metal Wolf Chaos (JPN)

Format: Xbox **Year:** 2004 **Expect To Pay:** £100-120

IT'S NOT WORTH it, only it *is*. From Software's Xbox-exclusive mech shooter might not be the best action game you'll ever play, but as gaming's *Team America* it's great for laughs if nothing else. As the president of the good ol' US of A, you get to jump into your budget Gundam and take back the country you love as much as mom's apple pie. Its cult appeal has seen the price skyrocket in recent years and although it's brilliant (if, like so many From games, accidentally and for all the wrong reasons), anyone that isn't a diehard collector can jump the turnstiles and just watch the best bits on YouTube.





Suikoden III (US)

Format: PS2 **Year:** 2002 **Expect To Pay:** £40-60

STRANGELY, THE ONLY main series entry to not receive a global release is also arguably the best. The Trinity Sight System gave players the opportunity to view the story through three different sets of eyes while combat was refined and improved over the earlier games, making this one of the most fondly remembered RPGs of its era. Visually, it doesn't stand up so well today, but even so, completionists and genre fans really should own a copy.









Ni No Kuni (JPN)

Format: DS **Year:** 2010 **Expect To Pay:** £30-40

THE ORIGINAL LINE from Level-5 was that the DS version of the beautiful Studio Ghibli collaboration would be too difficult to localise on account of it shipping with the complete physical magic book. Then the PS3 special edition came out over here with said book, while the regular version included a digital version (which even references stuff that doesn't apply to the PS3 version of the game). It's not quite the same without that HD sheen, but with so many DS owners out there, you have to assume that at least some of them would want to busy themselves with an excellent RPG.



Jeanne D'Arc (US)

Format: PSP **Year:** 2007 **Expect To Pay:** £5-10

HANDHELD PLATFORMS HAVE had all the luck with strategy RPGs in recent years and this brilliant (if ever-so-slightly easy) addition is most welcome. Big names like *Final Fantasy* might still dominate the genre, but that doesn't mean there isn't room for a game that pisses all over the history books to turn a real-life figure into a grid-obeying, frog-befriending, dragon-slaying, kick-arse warrior with the patience and decency to let her opponents have a go before she casts some ridiculous spell. And if that hyphen-heavy sentence wasn't enough to prise open your wallet, you should probably just stick to chess.







Final Fantasy XII International Zodiac Job System (JPN)

Format: PS2 **Year:** 2007 **Expect To Pay:** £30-40

SQUARE ENIX DOESN'T do special editions by halves and while many of the changes are based on those made to the Western game, it's the additional ones that earn this re-release a spot here. As the Zodiac part of the title suggests, the regular licence board was divided up 12 ways to make progression even more open-ended, plus the Gambit system got a complete overhaul to make it more user-friendly.



Game Center CX: Arino No Chousenjou 2 (JPN)

Format: DS **Year:** 2009 **Expect To Pay:** £35-45

***RETRO GAME CHALLENGE* really pressed all of our buttons, simultaneously spoofing and emulating all that was great about the halcyon days of gaming. This sequel improves on its predecessor with better games and challenges, the latter partly improved by not knowing what you're being asked to do thanks to Japanese text. Oddly, this somehow emulates the period itself – you're not quite sure why you're playing the terrible games (other than to burn time until the next one comes out), but you persist anyway. And by the end of it, you're literally the best person on the planet at Nobody Cares 4. Go you.**







Melty Blood: Actress Again (JPN)

Format: PS2 **Year:** 2009 **Expect To Pay:** £30-45

WHILE *STREET FIGHTER* and its high-profile ilk might have put the arcade stick back under the coffee table of many a gamer, there's still a wide world of different flavours to try out if you *really* like fighting games. Somewhere between the hardcore action of *BlazBlue* and the freeform silliness of *Arcana Heart* hides *Melty Blood*, a cutesy fighter which almost achieves the impossible by being as good as its name. It's a fast-paced, combo-heavy 2D fighter that makes *Marvel Vs Capcom* look positively pedestrian and if that's not recommendation enough for you, you either hate fighters or love Spider-Man a bit too much.

games™ SUBSCRIPTIONVOUCHER

☐ YES I would like to subscribe to games™

YOUR DETAILS

Title________ First name________

Surname________

Address________

Postcode________ Country________

Telephone number________

Mobile number________

Email address________

Please complete your email address to receive news and special offers from us

DIRECT DEBIT PAYMENT

☐ **UK Direct Debit Payment**

I will receive my first three issues for just £1, I will then pay only £21.00 every six issues thereafter. If, however, I do not love what I see, I can cancel at any time.

Instruction to your Bank or Building Society to pay by Direct Debit

Please fill in the form and send it to: games™ Subscriptions Dept, 800 Guillat Avenue, Kent Science Park, Sittingbourne ME9 8GU

Name and full postal address of your Bank or Building Society

To: The Manager Bank/Building Society

Address

Postcode

Name(s) of account holder(s)

Branch sort code

Bank/Building Society account number

Originator's Identification Number

5 0 1 8 8 4

Reference Number

Instructions to your Bank or Building Society
Please pay Imagine Publishing Limited Direct Debits from the account detailed in this instruction subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit guarantee. I understand that this instruction may remain with Imagine Publishing Limited and, if so, details will be passed on electronically to my Bank/Building Society

Signature(s)

Date

Banks and Building Societies may not accept Direct Debit instructions for some types of account

A6 instruction form

PAYMENT DETAILS

YOUR EXCLUSIVE READER PRICE, ONE YEAR (13 ISSUES)

☐ **UK: £52.00 (Save 20%)** ☐ **Europe: £70.00**

☐ **World: £80.00**

Cheque

☐ I enclose a cheque for £________
(made payable to Imagine Publishing Ltd)

Credit/Debit Card

☐ Visa ☐ MasterCard ☐ Amex ☐ Maestro

Card number Expiry date

Security number (last three digits on the strip at the back of the card)

Issue number (if Maestro)

Signed________

Date________

Code: PCG134 ☐ Tick this box if you do not wish to receive any promotional material from Imagine Publishing Ltd
☐ Tick this box if you do not wish to receive promotional material from other companies. Terms & Conditions apply. We publish 13 issues a year, your subscription will start from the next available issue unless otherwise indicated. Direct Debit guarantee details available on request. This offer expires without notice.

I would like my subscription to start from issue:

Return this order form to:

games™ Subscriptions Department, 800 Guillat Avenue, Kent Science Park, Sittingbourne, ME9 8GU or email it to gamestm@servicehelpline.co.uk

You will be able to view your subscription details online at www.imaginesubs.co.uk



FANTASTIC SUBSCRIBER OFFER

Subscribe today and get your first three issues for £1

- Pay only £3.50 for every future issue – a 30% saving on the store price
- Free UK delivery to your door
- Never miss an issue
- Money-back guarantee

Terms & Conditions

This offer entitles new UK direct debit subscribers to receive their first three issues for £1. After these issues, subscribers will then pay £21.00 every six issues. Subscribers can cancel this subscription at any time. New subscriptions will start from the next available issue. Offer code PCG134 must be quoted to receive this special subscription price. Details of the Direct Debit guarantee are available on request. Offer expires 31 July 2013. Imagine Publishing reserves the right to limit this type of offer to one per household.
Source Code PCG134 Web address: www.imaginesubs.co.uk/gtm
Tel: 0844 848 8429

3 ISSUES OF GAMES™ FOR JUST £1







GO DIGITAL!

GREAT DIGITAL SUBSCRIPTION OFFERS AVAILABLE AT:

IMAGINESUBS.CO.UK

FOR ANDROID, MAC, PC iPHONE & iPAD

Get your first 3 issues for just £1, then save 30% on the shop price

THREE EASY WAYS TO SUBSCRIBE

1. Online

www.imaginesubs.co.uk/gtm
And enter PCG134



2. Telephone

0844 848 8429
And quote PCG134



3. Post or email

Please complete and post the form to
games™ Subscriptions Department
800 Guillat Avenue
Kent Science Park
Sittingbourne
ME9 8GU

Or alternatively, you can scan and email the form to
gamestm@servicehelpline.co.uk



Reviews

THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.







88

BioShock Infinite

Ken Levine finally reveals his sky-high fantasy











AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or have we nailed it?

Let us know through the following channels:

facebook.com/gamesTM

@gamesTMmag
#gamestmiswrong #gamestmisright

gplus.to/gamesTMmagazine

GOD ONLY KNOWS WHERE WE'D BE WITHOUT YOU

BioShock Infinite

Gamers and critics often talk about videogaming's *Citizen Kane* moment – have we had it yet, will it ever come, does it matter? If you ask us, Irrational's Ken Levine has had a couple to himself. Rather than one defining moment that will flip the industry on its head, his games have robustly demonstrated what the medium – and the first-person genre in particular – is capable of. Irrational sets benchmarks. *BioShock Infinite* is just the latest Levine moment.

Ken would probably resist the comparison to *Kane*, purely because his games have such an apparent distaste for absolute autocracy. For Kane (and Andrew Ryan), in *BioShock Infinite* we have Zachary Hale Comstock, the self-proclaimed Prophet Of Columbia, who lords over the game's magnificent cloud city with religious zeal and a fervent commitment to the Founding Fathers of the USA.

As Booker DeWitt, a hired gun with a military past, you're sent to Columbia by a mysterious client who demands that in order to erase your significant gambling debt, you must return to New York City with 'the girl'.

The girl is, of course, Elizabeth, the star of *BioShock Infinite*'s marketing material and the driving force in its expertly crafted narrative. It's far from a spoiler to say that you do soon find her, and the pair form a believable, organic and emotionally resonant relationship as they travel and fight together through the game.

Before that, though, the player is treated to an astonishing opening hour that both recalls the original *BioShock* and completely eclipses it. Columbia is revealed in a similarly triumphant slice of theatre to that famous Rapture curtain-pull, but once you land in the city in the sky, *BioShock Infinite*'s own themes come flooding to the fore.

In terms of atmosphere, immersion and vision, Columbia is peerless. It feels simultaneously real and unreal; at once completely believable and totally surreal. The sense of place is palpable, but through Booker – the first vocal protagonist in an Irrational game – your place within Columbia never feels comfortable; you're always at odds with your surroundings.

They're some surroundings, though. Even on ageing Xbox 360 hardware, Columbia is stunning: the palette is rich and bold, the detail outrageous. NPCs chatter away to each other, sometimes letting you in on world-enriching details, sometimes just idly passing the time. Occasionally they'll acknowledge you, or a crowd will turn and stare directly into your eyes, and it's as startling and uncomfortable as it is in real life.

The opening 30 minutes or so play out without a gun in your hand. You simply soak in the world around you as cleverly disguised tutorials teach you the systems in play without ever feeling forced or strained. It's almost a shame, then, when the inevitable combat does actually kick in, especially as it does so in such deliberately jarring fashion – jumping from sumptuous celebration into hideous violence within the space of a few seconds.

After a few skirmishes with Columbia's guards, though, it becomes obvious that *BioShock Infinite* isn't remotely ashamed of its gameplay, and nor should we be. It likes being a shooter, it wants to be a shooter – a shooter that challenges and pushes the genre, just as the original *BioShock* did, but even more so.

The concept of 'same, but totally different' is a constant here, and it's applicable both to *BioShock Infinite*'s gameplay and its story. When in combat, you have access to traditional assault weapons (pistols, shotguns) and what are effectively superpowers, collected in the form of Vigors – swiggable potions that charge Booker with permanent new abilities.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TWO HANDS: You can use either trigger in combat, with the right for gunfire and the left for Vigors.
SKYWARD SWORD: As amazing as Rapture is, Colombia's vistas are on a different level.

IT DOESN'T PRESUME THAT YOU'RE TOO STUPID OR TOO IMPATIENT TO CONSIDER ITS COMPLICATED AND CHALLENGING THEMES



DETAILS
FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: 2K
DEVELOPER: Irrational Games
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Above: The art design is peerless and even on 360 the game looks magnificent. There's a softness to the world that you can almost reach out and touch, accentuated by smooth player movement.

BETTER THAN — BIOSHOCK 2



AS GOOD AS — BIOSHOCK



Right: Skylines are easy to use. You can attach to them from quite a distance, then slow down, speed up and turn around. While hanging, you can shoot and leap to the ground or another rail.



PARTY LIKE IT'S…

Upon completion, *BioShock Infinite* opens up its vaunted 1999 difficulty setting – a throwback to the cruel harshness of Irrational's classic *System Shock 2*. And it's quite an undertaking. Health and Salts are extremely hard to come by, the enemies are tougher and more accurate, and the penalty for death is far, far higher. It makes for an incredibly tense and thrilling second playthrough, but that is definitely what it's for. The hardcore among you may decry the fact that 1999 isn't playable from the start, but its staccato nature and punishing difficulty would decimate *Infinite*'s mercurial storytelling – and, quite frankly, that's just more important.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

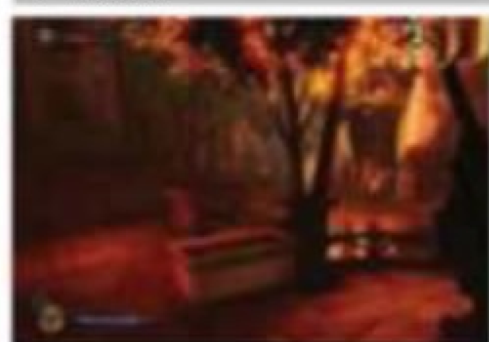
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

5 MINS



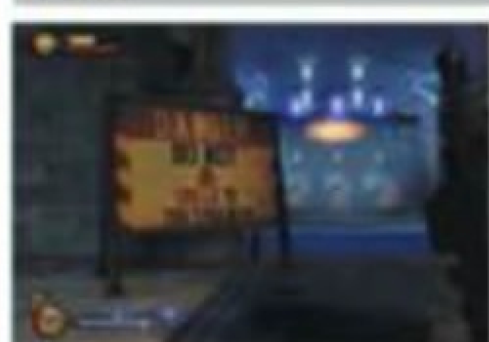
An opening so utterly magnificent that it makes everything else you've ever played look facile. The introduction to the airborne city of Columbia is something you'll remember forever.

3 HOURS



By this point there is a more familiar pace to the game and a lot more combat to test your reactions and skills. For all its ambition, *BioShock Infinite* is still most certainly a shooter.

4 DAYS



The adventure is all over, and you're left with the kind of melancholy that comes from knowing you can never experience it for the first time again. On the other hand, you can try out 1999 Mode.



Below: Elizabeth helps out during combat by throwing you ammo, health and Salts at opportune moments. She's never a hindrance, and her presence is as vital to the experience as the gun in your hand.

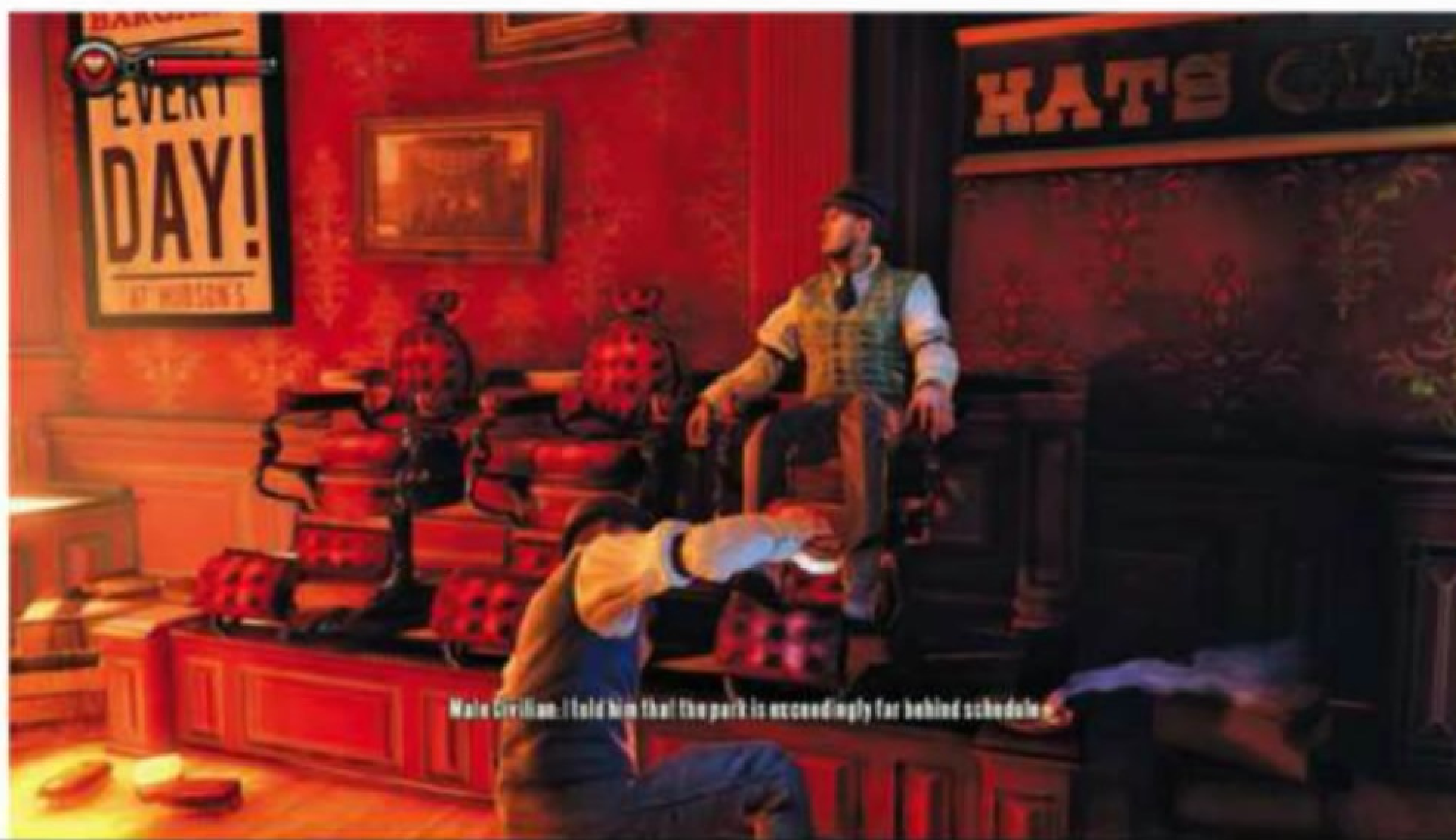




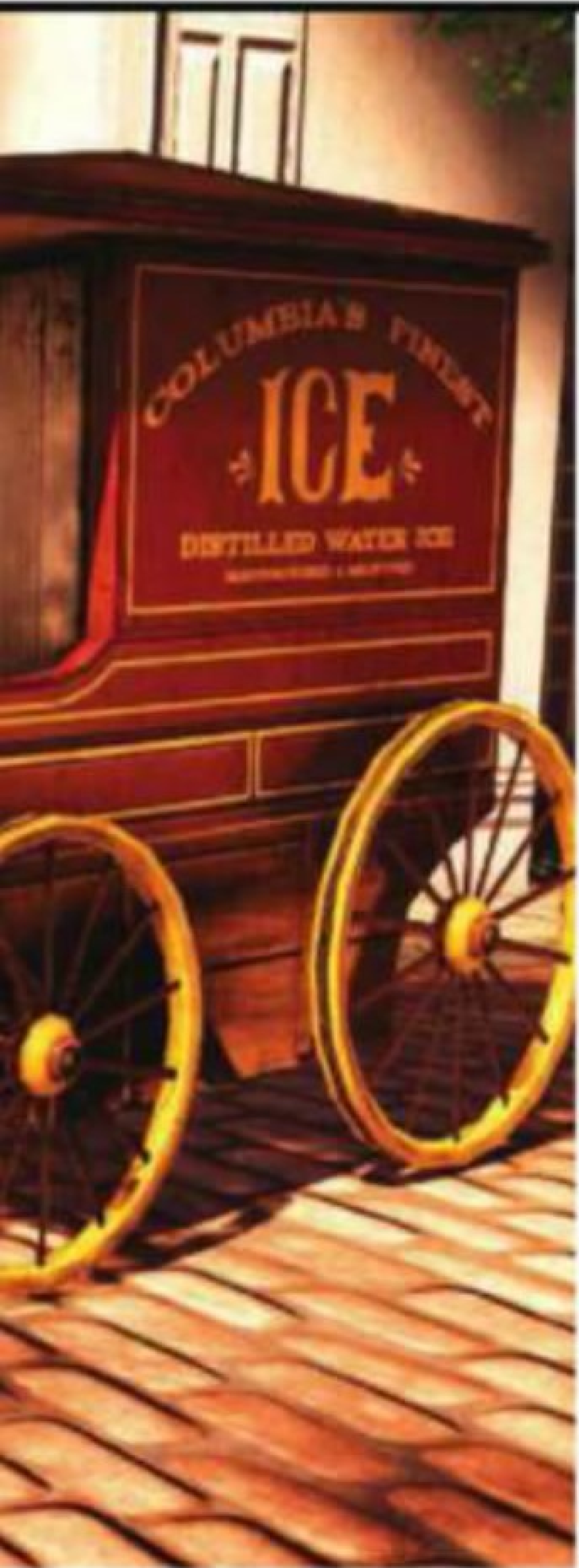
Above: The gunplay is very satisfying, much more so than in the original *BioShock*. Weapons feel powerful and loud, just the way we like 'em.

COMBO BREAKER

The Vigors, *Infinite*'s Plasmid equivalents, cannot only be used in conjunction with regular weapons, but some can also be 'comboed' for extra devastation. The Murder Of Crows Vigor, for example, can be ignited by a well-aimed Devil's Kiss, sending a flaming crow army hurtling towards some poor unfortunate. Not many of the combos are explicitly revealed, so you'll have to experiment with different loadouts (you can switch between two at a time, but all Vigors are accessible from a radial wheel). And no, we're not going to spoil them. This isn't a game for spoiling.







So far, so *BioShock*. The first few Vigors are very familiar, too, giving DeWitt the ability to possess an enemy or opposing machine, or the power to hurl fireballs and set flaming traps. The flow of combat is vastly superior, though. Its pace and purpose is more in line with the forever-underrated *BioShock 2* – a sense of controlling chaos through aggression. And it does a mean line in headshots.

Where *BioShock* challenged the genre with its Big Daddies, *BioShock Infinite* does so in different ways. There are no Big Daddy equivalents, no non-aggressive enemies; instead there are layers to the combat that give the firefights incredible variety. The skylines that connect different parts of Columbia's floating neighbourhoods can be hooked onto and ridden like a rollercoaster. *Infinite*'s best shoot-outs let you circumnavigate normal kill boxes from the sky, diving onto enemies and then quickly reattaching to scoot off beyond their gunfire.

Beyond that is Elizabeth. She's been locked up in a tower her whole life and is known as the Lamb, the messianic daughter of Comstock who will one day rule over Columbia. When Booker rescues her from her prison and pries her away from her guardian, Songbird – a giant mechanical bird that is controlled by song – it becomes pretty clear she's no ordinary girl.

Elizabeth can open 'tears' in the world – glimpses into another existence – and from these tears she can bring things back. In combat, this is extremely useful. Every battleground has shimmering grey artefacts dotted around and you can ask Elizabeth to summon whatever lies behind them, be it something as simple as a powerful weapon or as devastating as a sentry gun. She can only bring in one at a time, so combat takes on a tactical layer that's never been seen before, as you must manage your own gunplay, the skylines above you and the tools that Liz can bring to the party. When it all comes together, it sings louder than Songbird itself.

Much like *BioShock*, some of the tension in combat is damaged by Irrational's commitment to redefining videogame death. There are no Vita-Chambers in Columbia, but if Booker runs out of health he'll simply be revived around a nearby corner for a marginal sum of money and thrown back into the fray. It's a strange system, although not as easy to lazily abuse as it was in both Rapture-set *BioShock*s.

Ultimately, you can understand Levine's approach, and it all comes back to Elizabeth. The dialogue between her and DeWitt is believable and superbly written, but the real relationship exists in between the words. Her animation and facial expressions are on a level never seen in a game. She reacts to everything, be it as huge as a building exploding or as small as Booker's inability to pick a simple lock. At times, you could find yourself looking to Elizabeth to make sense of the world around you. Does she look comfortable? How is she reacting? How should I react? All of this from an AI companion. It's truly groundbreaking. Having that relationship constantly challenged by intrusive resets and reloads upon death would damage the game as a whole.

The thing is, none of this stuff really comes to mind when you're playing because Elizabeth's integration into the world is just so fluid, so natural. Even though *BioShock Infinite* is a videogame that doesn't shy away from its own form, it's so easy to get lost in it. Other, less confident games would never let something as inherently daft as changing your trousers alter your character's buffs (no, we didn't just make that up), but *BioShock Infinite* doesn't presume that you don't understand games and how they work, just as it doesn't presume that you're too stupid or too impatient to consider its complicated and challenging themes. It treats players' intellects with respect.

Still, it has to be said that Levine and his team haven't shied away from pushing a few envelopes with *Infinite*'s themes. Racial segregation, eugenics, religious fundamentalism and American exceptionalism are all examined and explored, and done so with all the skill and craft you would expect from the people that brought you Rapture. What you may not expect, though, is *Infinite*'s sci-fi bent. This is a game that has as much fascination with quantum mechanics as it does the birth of America.

How Levine and his team (which includes *BioShock* scribe Drew Holmes and *BioShock 2* writer Jordan Thomas) manage to tie these vast concepts together is, at times, actually unbelievable. If this was a film script, it would slide straight into the intelligent blockbuster shelf alongside Nolan or Duncan Jones's back catalogues, but the fact that this is a game actually elevates its narrative rather than hinders it. This is a world you can see, feel and touch. It's one where you are a fantastically written character and yourself at the same time. This isn't a film script. It's more than that.

Now, there are games that arguably do more. *Halo* has more advanced combat; *COD* has multiplayer; *Minecraft* has the very essence of creation. These games, as special as they are in their own areas, won't have the same lasting effect as *BioShock Infinite*. As the story presses on, as you learn more about Booker and Elizabeth – about Comstock and Columbia – it unravels and unfurls itself so captivatingly, upping the stakes narratively but also systemically. By the end it will have left an indelible mark, the same kind of mark that *BioShock*'s classic bait-and-switch reveal left, the same kind that truly great works of entertainment and art leave on the people they touch.

To pick any holes in *BioShock Infinite* seems so counterproductive that it's almost not worth it. Yes, it looks much better on PC and there are disparate frame-rate dips on console (however, it still looks supreme on PS3 and 360). Perhaps the pace falters ever so slightly during the middle act. Will its story appeal to everyone? Maybe not: it's far from straightforward and requires effort on the part of the audience.

None of this matters. This is a celebration – a Columbia itself, an example of just what this medium can do in the right hands. We've had to turn to the indies in recent years for intellectually fulfilling videogames; therefore much credit has to go to Irrational and its backers 2K for believing in a project this bold and clearly this expensive.

It does all come back to that 'same, but different' dissonance. *Infinite* is as lavish as it is cerebral, as difficult as it is accessible. It'll be many different things to many different people, and it will be discussed, dissected and deified for many years to come.

So, when will gaming have its *Citizen Kane* moment? Forget that. When will anything else have its *BioShock Infinite* moment?

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

STORYTELLERS: Levine and his team are amazingly good writers, and *Infinite*'s story is a treasure.
LIZ BIZ: The relationship with Elizabeth is cemented by her facial expressions and vocal performance.

FAQs

Q. BETTER THAN BIOSHOCK?
Yes, because it's five years newer and a far smoother prospect. Narratively, the two go arm in arm.

Q. RAPTURE OR COLUMBIA?
Both are the constructs of immeasurable vision (both in-game and in the real world), but for sheer artistry Columbia might just take it.

Q. NO BIG DADDIES?
No. This is a *BioShock* game, but it isn't a sequel to *BioShock*. It'll all make sense when you play it.

IT FEELS SIMULTANEOUSLY REAL AND UNREAL; AT ONCE COMPLETELY BELIEVABLE AND TOTALLY SURREAL



VERDICT 10/10
SURE TO BE ONE OF GAMING'S DEFINING MOMENTS

WAR NEVER CHANGES

Gears Of War: Judgment

They say that putting your child into the care of another is one of the hardest things you have to do as a parent. It could be the first time you have to leave them with a babysitter or that uncomfortable farewell when you drop them off for their first day of school. But no matter which way you look at it, kids grow up and your responsibility for them slowly starts to diminish. We imagine this is how some of the founding members of Bungie felt when they handed over the keys to 343 Industries; maybe not quite as deeply affecting, of course, but when you've become emotionally attached to something it can be hard to let go.

This is the position that Epic Games found itself in after completing its work on *Gears Of War 3*. Marcus Fenix had finally dealt with the Locust forces on Sera and – for all intents and purposes – the trilogy had ended its five-year run on a resoundingly high note. It also felt like the third game had refined the cover-based mechanics to their natural limit and unless Epic could come up with something totally unprecedented, a third sequel would only offer more of the same. This gives credence to the growing trend of franchise loaning between studios. After all, who could forget the brilliance of *Metal Gear Rising*?

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

SWELL SPAWN: The new Smart Spawn System means that, if you're playing through the campaign or multiplayer, each encounter will be subtly changed as different enemies spawn from different locations.

Unfortunately, it seems that relinquishing control is a risk that few studios are prepared to make. Rather than taking the hands-off approach, Epic decided to collaborate with its closest bedfellow. This was none other than People Can Fly – a wholly owned subsidiary of Epic Games that has already proven itself more than capable with the underappreciated *Bulletstorm*. Instead of focusing on the do-rag charms of regular protagonist Marcus Fenix, *Gears Of War: Judgment* is a prequel that centres on the odd-couple duo of Baird and Cole. The result is a game that feels safe and inherently familiar but effortlessly delivers on a tried and tested combat system which is, even now, hard to fault.

The new Campaign kicks off in the ensuing aftermath of Emergence Day. As the leader of Kilo Squad, Baird is forced to stand trial alongside his fellow teammates after they disobeyed a direct order in their fight against the Locust Horde. The man in charge of the hearing is Colonel Loomis, a no-nonsense solider who despises insubordination and has about as much compassion as Sergeant Hartman. The reasoning behind Kilo Squad's arrest is initially unclear, but as each squad mate runs through their testimony in the flashback sequences that make up the six main chapters, you'll gradually piece together the whole story before the game reaches its deflated conclusion.

We'd wager that most *Gears* fans will buy *Judgment* on the promise of more roadie-run executions and hidden COG tags, and in this regard the game doesn't disappoint. The control scheme has been altered to accommodate a dedicated grenade button that lets you toss out an ink, incendiary or frag grenade without having to consult the D-pad. The pistol slot has also been removed entirely. This means that, like most other modern-day shooters, you can only carry two guns at a time. The trade-off is that weapon switching is about twice as fast, with off-the-hip shotgun kills being even snappier than before.

The adjustments to the control scheme come hand-in-hand with some subtle changes to the existing armoury. The sawed-off shotgun, for instance, is now a two-shot weapon rather than a shrapnel cannon that blows both barrels by default. The game also introduces a semi-automatic counterpart to the Longshot called the Markza Rifle, in addition to a scope-less sniper rifle, a grenade launcher that fires timed explosives, a crossbow that dispenses proximity mines and a grenade that heals any COG soldiers that walk into its area-of-effect. None of these weapons alter the

IT'S REFRESHING TO HAVE LONG-RANGE OPTIONS THAT DON'T FORCE YOU TO RELOAD AFTER EACH AND EVERY SHOT

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US/Poland
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Studios
DEVELOPER: Epic Games/People Can Fly
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-10
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: ARMY OF TWO: THE 40TH DAY



WORSE THAN: GEARS OF WAR 3

Below: We only encountered the Silverback once during our campaign playthrough, but the COG mech still packs a punch with its on-board minigun. It has also been removed from the less cluttered Survival and OverRun modes.



Above: One of the curious things about the new Survival mode is that you no longer buy fortifications and weapons with points. There are no penalties for dying either, as you simply respawn back into the action a few seconds later.

HAPPILY EVER AFTERMATH

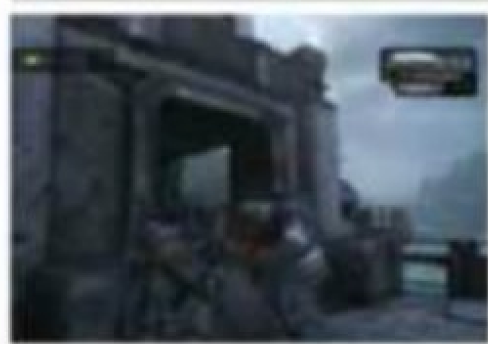
Each time you complete a section in the main *Judgment* campaign you will be awarded a star rating from zero to three. Turning on the Mission Declassifications makes it much easier to earn the highest possible rating, and if you manage to earn at least 40 of the 126 stars on offer (which is fairly straightforward), you'll unlock a supplementary chapter called Aftermath. This is set during the events of *Gears Of War 3* and has Baird, Cole, Carmine and newcomer Paduk returning to Halvo Bay to secure reinforcements for Marcus. This additional chapter is far less disjointed than Judgment's main single-player campaign and offers its fair share of surprises. It also helps to bolster an otherwise short completion time.

Left: We may have seen the chainsaw execution a few thousand times already, but landing it on a distracted opponent never gets old.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

60 MINS



You have finished off a few of the Mission Declassifications and have now rewired your mind to steer clear of the D-pad. Things are starting off slowly, but you haven't lost faith.

8 HOURS



That's both the main and bonus Aftermath campaigns completed. You were slightly disappointed by the lack of epic moments, but the gunplay was still satisfyingly top notch.

7 DAYS



Wave 10 on Insanity is still a far-off dream, but you have finally cleared Survival on Hardcore. You have also unlocked your fair share of *Judgment*'s medals, ribbons and weapon skins.



dynamics of the gunplay in any serious way, but it's refreshing to have long-range options that don't force you to reload after each and every shot.

Whether you're dosing a Drone in Lancer fire, bombarding a Grinder with Mortar shells or waiting for a Corpser to emerge so you can end its burrowing shenanigans with a OneShot to the face, the minute-to-minute firefights are like a greatest hits collection of everything we've seen before – just without any of the seismic set pieces, as *Judgment* tends to keep the encounters fairly grounded. If there's one way in which the campaign feels fundamentally different, though, it's the modular structure. It often feels like the game is permanently stuck in score attack mode as whenever you finish one of the seven sections that make up each chapter, you're presented with a statistical rundown of how you fared.

You could argue that this scoreboard enforcement breaks the sense of immersion, and yet, it's clear that *Judgment*'s campaign is more about the challenge than the journey. As a case in point, every level has an optional Mission Declassification that makes the section more challenging. This could be anything from introducing a thick dust cloud that limits your visibility or bolstering the attacking forces with Serapedes to removing your ability to regenerate lost health or forcing you to fight with a Boltok pistol. It's a genuinely engaging addition that tactfully enhances the difficulty. It's also one of the few ways in which *Judgment* stands apart from its predecessors.

Another interesting addition to the ebb and flow of the campaign is the introduction of Horde-style sections. *Gears Of War* has asked us to defend mansions and fortresses before, of course, but these levels up the ante with razor wire fences and portable sentry turrets that come in ranged and shotgun variations, and must be manually reloaded. There's even a countdown timer that tells you how long you have to wait before the next wave hits, and if you want to stand any chance of survival on the Insanity difficulty you'll need to place each turret in the optimum position so you don't get overwhelmed by explosive Tickers and Lambent Wretches.

On top of familiar Locust beasties like the bulky Boomers and the Torque Bow-touting Theron Guards, Epic has introduced a couple of new enemy types. The most prominent of these is the short-tempered Rager. These human-sized Locust carry the new Breechshot and look fairly unimposing, but if you fail to decapitate them with a well-placed headshot, they'll ditch the rifle and use a blowfish-style ability that turns them into a stampeding mass of fury. The Former, meanwhile, is a new

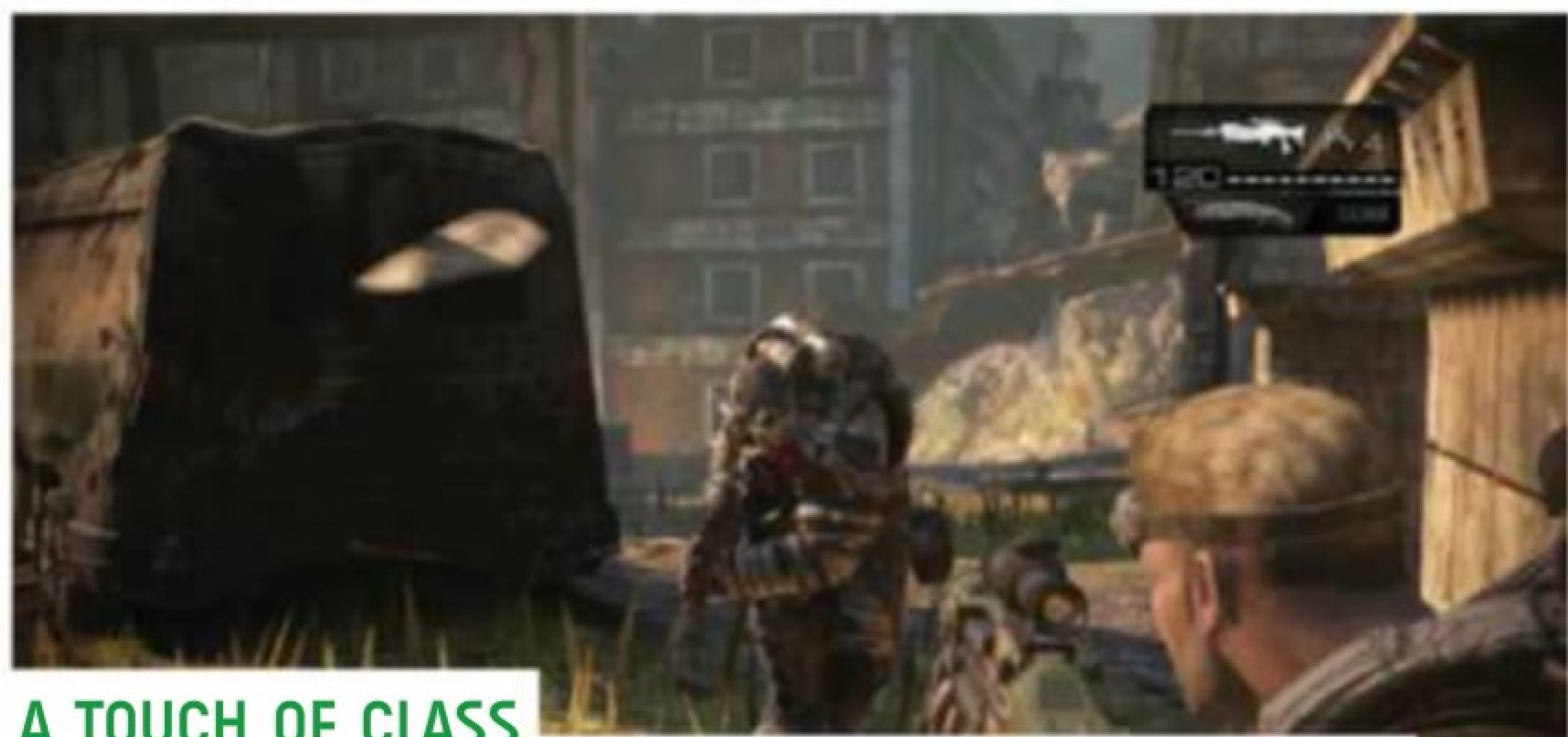
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

INACTIVE RELOADS: The active reload system has been a longstanding cornerstone of the series, so we're not sure why Epic chose to remove the bullet-enhancing sweet spot from the multiplayer modes.

Below: When playing as the Locust you can pick the Ticker, Wretch, Grenadier or Kantus at any time. You then earn points that can be used to unlock more formidable monstrosities like the Rager, Serapede, Mauler and Corpser.



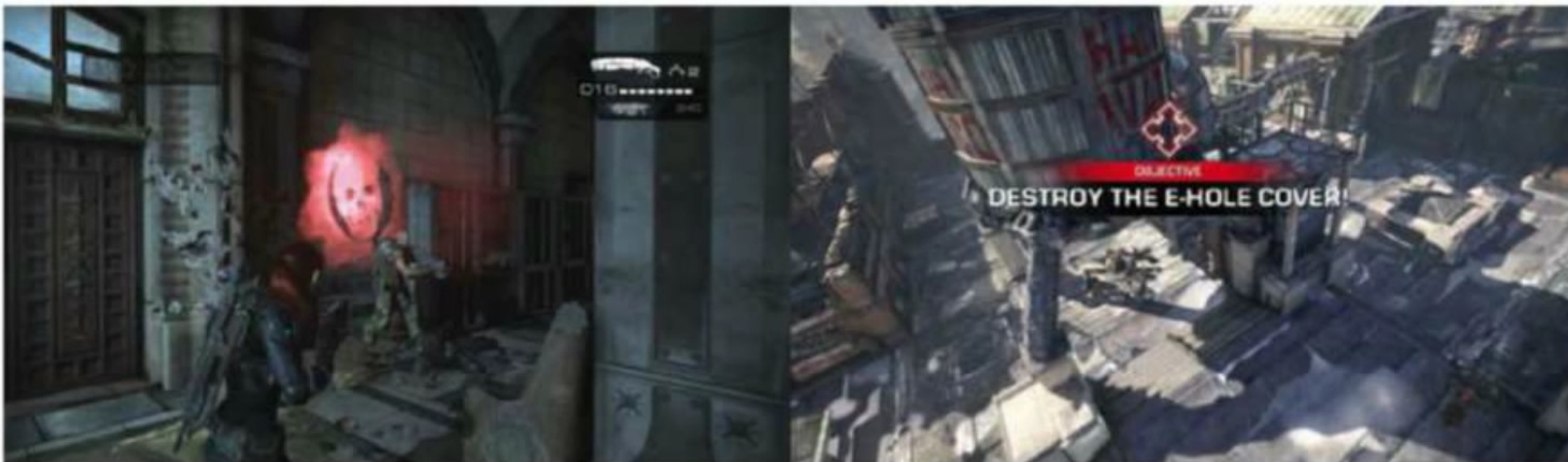


A TOUCH OF CLASS

The four COG classes are Engineer, Soldier, Scout, and Medic. The Soldier wields the Lancer, Booshka grenade launcher and can deploy ammo caches. The Medic gets the Lancer, a point-blank sawed-off shotgun and can revive teammates with Stim-Gas Grenades. The Scout's a sniper class with the new Markza Rifle, classic Snub Pistol and Spot Grenades that highlight enemies through walls. Lastly, the Engineer has the Gnasher Shotgun and a repair tool, and can deploy a sentry turret that will mow down grubs from a distance. Our preferred tactic is to have three Engineers supported by a Solider and a Medic, but it'll be interesting to see how other combinations fare.



Right: In terms of aesthetic presentation, *Judgment* is roughly on par with *Gears Of War 3*, and is certainly no slouch when it comes to explosions and bloody executions. Just don't expect it to blow you away with anything especially epic.



Left: At one point during a particularly frantic Survival session we shouted, "Quick! The Serapede is destroying the E-hole!" True story.

flying creature that assaults you from the skies with its machine gun. Thankfully, they're able to shrug off lead with all the confidence of a clay pigeon.

It's somewhat disappointing that the development team didn't introduce a wider range of enemy variations as well as bring back more of the Lambent Locust, although considering the game's place in the story, we appreciate that having an unfamiliar Locust rock up with a makeshift railgun may have raised a few eyebrows. What we can't understand, however, is the anaemic approach to boss encounters. That's not to say the odd Reaver or Berserker encounter doesn't throw in the occasional curveball, but in terms of the Riftworm in *Gears 2* or the Lambent Leviathan in *Gears 3*, the only thing that comes close is the showdown with General Karn – even then he's no substitute for RAAM or Skorge.

If it's beginning to sound like we're picking *Judgment*'s campaign apart it's not because we didn't enjoy the game, it's because it kept building towards something epic without having the ambition to deliver it. It's almost like being invited to take a brand new sports car for a spin around a deserted Silverstone, but under strict instruction to stay in first gear at all times.

Above: Whenever you see this mark you can trigger a Mission Declassification. The ones with time limits are especially tricky to finish.

FAQs

Q. IS COLE ON FORM?
At one point he talks about how he started collecting wine just so he'd have something to put in his cellar, so yes.

Q. COG VS COG?
You only play as the Locust in the OverRun and Survival modes. This means there are no locust skins to unlock.

Q. WHO THE HELL IS KARN?
He's a new Locust general that rides atop a massive spider-like creature called a Shibboleth. Go figure.

THE FIREFIGHTS ARE LIKE A GREATEST HITS COLLECTION OF EVERYTHING WE'VE SEEN BEFORE

So the burning question is: does *Judgment*'s multiplayer component make up for the solid yet underwhelming campaign? Not entirely, but it contains enough new features to feel like a genuine (if not necessarily better) departure from the online battlefields of *Gears Of War 3*.

The new Survival mode replaces the classic Horde, with a team of up to five players defending an objective against ten increasingly brutal waves. Aside from the additional player slot, Survival introduces a new class system (see 'A touch of class') that determines each player's loadout and special ability. And while ten waves may seem like short change when compared to the last game's 50, making it to the final wave is anything but a cakewalk on the hardest difficulty. You'll learn to appreciate the three strikes system that pushes your team back to another objective – especially when a Wretch sneaks past on the penultimate wave while your back is turned.

If you can pull off a stealthy manoeuvre like this while playing as the Locust in OverRun, however, you'll feel suitably epic. This mode stands in for Beast and has one team defending an objective with access to the four new COG classes while the other batters his or her way through with the Locust Horde. Out of all the versus modes available in the game, this is arguably the most engaging, as not only does each COG class play a central role within the team, the Locust have to counter by saving up their points before launching a joint assault with their strongest classes – otherwise a co-ordinated COG squad will dig in deep and pick you off individually.

Survival and OverRun both use a pool of four maps that include an open island and a more tightly confined junkyard. In comparison, the three COG vs COG modes use four different maps that are more suited to traditional shootouts. Team deathmatch and domination will be familiar to anyone who's played an online shooter in the last decade, while free for all represents a first for the series. Now you can finally say to hell with the team synergy and instead focus on picking a single weapon – be it the clunky Hammerburst assault rifle or eternally versatile Gnasher shotgun – while praying that you see them before they see you in the ultimate peek-a-boom arena.

In the end, *Gears Of War: Judgment* comes across as an enjoyable stopgap in a series that seems unsure where it's supposed to go next. This is more of the same with a few new features thrown in for good measure. But when the same equates to arguably the best cover-based shooter on the market, it's hard to be too judgemental. We just hope that if Epic is secretly working on the first instalment of a new *Gears Of War* trilogy for the next generation, it has the confidence to remove the stabilisers and push its baby to go beyond what's comfortable and into the upper gears. Maybe that's too much to ask, but sometimes letting go is the only way to see something develop further.

VERDICT 7/10
SHIFTING DOWN A GEAR

TT FUSION HAS GIVEN UP A KEY ASPECT OF THE POPULAR LEGO SERIES IN FAVOUR OF SOME QUITE THROWAWAY GAMEPAD MECHANICS

WHO NEEDS SKYLANDERS?

One of the most interesting aspects of *Lego City: Undercover* is its unique approach to downloadable content. Early on in the game there's the opportunity to take a high-speed car for a spin; the caveat is that you need to buy the physical product first in order to register the code that comes with it. Once that's done you're given access to the vehicle in question and access to additional side missions. We don't know if this is genius or insidious, but it's further indication of a lucrative new direction that certain brands and publishers are heading in. We're not sure if later physical models will be introduced, but it's an interesting if rather cynical way of extending the game's longevity.







Left: Flying vehicles are unlocked later in the game and make traversing the city a lot more bearable. One nice touch is that you can jump out when you see handy crash mats below you.

TT FUSION TAKES THE LEGO FRANCHISE TO ITS NEXT LOGICAL STEP, BUT IS IT A STEP TOO FAR?

LEGO City: Undercover

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: TT Fusion
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

One of the great things about the *Lego* franchise is that you know exactly where you are with it. Granted, there have been occasional innovations within the series, but for the most part they've been ideal collectathons, perfect for playing with a partner or a younger sibling or child (if you're old enough to have one of your own).

It's a brave developer, then, that dares to move away from that tried and tested moneymaking format – and sadly for TT Fusion and Nintendo, it's a gamble that hasn't really paid off.

The concept of *Lego City: Undercover* is brilliant, effectively giving you an entire city to run rampant in. It works for the most part as well, with the slick visuals showing of plenty of lush locations, from built-up city areas to deep forests and inviting beaches. It's a pleasing size, too – big enough that you'll welcome all the boats and airborne vehicles that you gain access to later on in the game.

The story is enjoyable, telling the tale of disgraced detective Chase McCain, summoned back to the city to recapture Rex Fury, a master criminal who's recently broken out of prison and is on a crime spree. It's a simple story, but it's one that constantly shines thanks to the fact that it's genuinely funny and full of clever pop culture references. One minute you're watching well-constructed parodies of *The Matrix*, *Goodfellas* and *Dirty Harry*, the next you're listening to a character who sounds like Arnold Schwarzenegger and can't finish a sentence without dropping one of his movie titles. Writer Graham Goring used to be a stand-up comic and his timing is evident in the witty script.

The weird thing here, though, is we're not exactly sure who *Lego City: Undercover* wants to

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

FUNNY BONES: While there has been plenty of humour in *Lego* games before, this is by far the funniest. The dialogue throughout is rich, with plenty of jokes tucked away in the background.



Left: There are a huge number of mini-games. Many of them are extremely basic, but they're bound to entertain younger gamers. Games range from dunking baskets to lifting weights or using running machines.



Left: Levels contain plenty of studs, so try to collect as many as you can before you reach the end. There's always the option to replay a level if you do miss things, though.



be played by, as it's missing a massive component of past *Lego* games, namely the always-excellent multiplayer mode. Due to the lack of a popular licence, we can't see many older gamers wanting to pick this up, while the younger gamers it's so clearly aimed at are simply not going to get the references. It's a real pity, as Goring's work really should be commended.

What can't be commended is TT Fusion's decision to give up a key aspect of the *Lego* series in favour of some throwaway GamePad mechanics. Chase can use the GamePad's screen to set waypoints, scan for hidden Lego blocks, overhear the conversations of distant convicts and take photos of the well-crafted city. They all feel completely pointless, however, and do nothing to enhance the overall gameplay. Most of the abilities are only used at certain points of the game, and while the sharing of photos on MiiVerse is a nice touch, there are never enough interesting things happening in the city anyway.

There's no denying that being able to rotate 360 degrees around the city is impressive, but we can use our eyes just as well to discover things, thank you very much. It's not the first time that a game has suffered so that a system's new tech can be shoehorned into it – and we're pretty sure it won't be the last – but it pains us that a huge part of the *Lego* franchise's identity has been stripped out for completely superfluous features.

Move away from the weak GamePad features and you'll discover that there are plenty of things to enjoy about *Lego City: Undercover*. The 15 chapters of the game often consist of numerous levels that dovetail nicely into the large game world. It's a natural evolution of the bigger hubs found in the likes of *Lego Batman 2*, but works on a far better scale here. There's a genuine desire to explore the huge city, and TT Fusion has filled it with a quite insane amount of collectables that will have certain gamers returning to the city long after the main story has finished.

Sadly, while the city itself is full of hidden secrets that promise untold treasures, getting around the beautifully constructed town is something of a pain. There are a huge number of vehicles to unlock and discover in *Lego City: Undercover*, but every single one we found was a real pig to steer. Bikes and cars are overly twitchy and too sensitive to control, while bigger vehicles like trucks and lorries are sluggish. Things get a little better once you gain access to boats and airborne vehicles, but it feels odd that TT Fusion has made the city so awkward to explore.

There is fun to be had, though. In addition to the usual studs that can be collected and used to purchase vehicles and characters, *Lego City: Undercover* also introduces Super Bricks. These are typically found when you destroy objects, but more expensive blocks are found hidden throughout the city. You'll need to collect as many of these new bricks as you can, since they're used to activate the Super Builds that are placed throughout the game world. Super Builds are typically used to propel the story forward, building an impressive-looking dragon or a handy ferry, but they're also used to build convenient waypoints around the city and other useful items.

FAQs

Q. WHAT'S THE FIGHTING LIKE?

Very basic, we're afraid. Being a game for kids, it mainly consists of Chase evading enemies then cuffing them at a convenient time.

Q. ARE THERE PIG CANNONS?

Yes, there are. They are at strategic points throughout the city and are used to send wayward swines home.

Q. ANY CLUES TO A SEQUEL?

No, but there is a billboard showing a Lego Sherlock Holmes and several question marks, implying a possible game, which makes sense seeing as Warner makes the films.



Right: There are plenty of vehicles scattered around the city for you to drive, although cars and bikes suffer from twitchy controls that make them difficult to steer.







Right: The best part of *Lego City: Undercover* is easily the many parodies it contains. They mimic everything from *Titanic* to *The Matrix*, and many of them are very, very funny. This is obviously from *The Shawshank Redemption*. Great impression as well.

ULTIMATELY THOUGH, IT'S THE LACK OF MULTIPLAYER AND A WELL-KNOWN LICENCE THAT PROVES TO BE LEGO CITY: UNDERCOVER'S ACHILLES' HEEL

Below: Chase gets more skills as he gains more costumes. Initially having access to things like grappling hooks, he'll soon unlock a paint gun and gain access to a fire hose.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

1 HOUR



Having finished your first mission, you'll be eager to explore the huge city. You might see Lego versions of The Beatles crossing the Abbey Road, but we may have imagined that.

10 HOURS



You should be a good two-thirds through the game by now, unless you've gone off on a collecting bender. You'll start getting irritated by the simple gameplay and limited side missions.

2 DAYS



You'll have finished the story a long time ago, but the obsessive in you will be scouring every single block of Lego in search of those precious bricks as you try to complete the game 100%.



SO MANY BRICKS, SO LITTLE TIME

If you're serious about your collecting then *Lego City: Undercover* is a dream come true. There are 450 gold blocks, 40 red blocks, 290 characters and 110 vehicles to be found throughout the city, meaning it will take many hours outside the 15-hour story to 100% it. With its *Grand Theft Auto*-style open world, *Lego City: Undercover* also offers plenty of side missions, ranging from parkour sections and races around the city to saving cats and other shenanigans. They're often hit-and-miss in their execution – with the vehicle missions particularly suffering – but it's a testament to TT Fusion that it's thrown so much into the game outside of the main story.



Then there are the numerous disguises that Chase gains access to as the story progresses. Initially, you'll find that Lego City is full of barred doors that can't be accessed until you've unlocked the relevant costume. Each costume often grants a number of different skills, so the thief can use a crowbar to jimmy open doors, while the miner can smash open boulders with his pick or blow up metallic objects with dynamite. They form the basis of many of the game's puzzles, but there's very little skill involved, making *Lego City: Undercover* the perfect entry point for younger gamers.

TT Fusion's game otherwise sticks with the usual tried and tested *Lego* formula, meaning the core game is enjoyable, if a little tired and predictable at times. The larger size of the game world means that the occasionally iffy controls and patchy jumping from earlier games is now amplified, which can get more than a little frustrating. Falling in the past was fine as you never had far to go, but it's a lot more infuriating when you're falling from a hotel roof or other high location that often can't be returned to without a serious amount of backtracking. It becomes even more frustrating when you realise that the game introduces cool parkour elements that you rarely want to return to because the core controls make them too frustrating to bother with. The joy of games like *Grand Theft Auto* is that you want to return and better yourself in past missions, but this is rarely the case with *Lego City: Undercover*.

Other annoyances are the numerous technical issues found throughout the game. Load times between exteriors and interiors are excruciatingly painful to sit through, often taking up to a minute. Navigating the city is also problematic due to the far from smooth frame rate and annoying pop-up, which limits the view of the beautifully detailed city that TT Fusion has created. TT Fusion has previously worked on handheld *Lego* games, which may explain the teething issues found here.

Ultimately though, it's the lack of multiplayer and a well-known movie licence that proves to be *Lego City: Undercover*'s Achilles' heel. We've no doubt that youngsters will love the opportunity to run rampant using the very toys they continually pull apart at home, but it's hard to imagine that *Undercover*'s basic gameplay and twitchy driving controls will sit well with older players, particularly as there's no longer the option to simply mess around with a friend like you could in past games. *Lego City: Undercover* isn't a terrible game by any means, but it's certainly not the triple-A title that Nintendo and impatient Wii U owners have been waiting for.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

PLAY WITH FRIENDS: The game desperately needs a multiplayer component; it's simply not as fun without it. Here's hoping TT Fusion includes it if a sequel eventually appears.

VERDICT 6/10

A FUN GAME PROMISING A LOT OF FUTURE POTENTIAL



ABOUT A 5.0 ON THE RICHTER SCALE

Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow: Mirror Of Fate

You have to feel kind of sorry for MercurySteam. After managing to brilliantly adapt the classic *Castlevania* lore and format to a 3D action game in *Lords Of Shadow* – with so many other studios having failed to do just that – the weight of expectation was always likely to be too much for the team to bear. But while it looks as though it could be on track for a repeat performance in the console sequel, this handheld middle ground between new and old will please fans at neither end of the stadium, largely because it attempts to thrust together two very different kinds of game that just happen to carry the same name.

So while the bottom screen won't shut up about how good *Symphony Of The Night* was, the top one screams relentlessly about the sick combat in *Lords Of Shadow*. Neither is wrong, to be fair, but *Mirror Of Fate* fails to capitalise on either. It feels like a failed attempt to translate the impressive 3D action of *Lords Of Shadow* into a language that fans of the 16-bit games can understand, but it just doesn't work – whip strikes have such range as to make most enemy attacks simple to avoid, while flaws and/or overpowered technical elements within the combat system make it way too simple and unsatisfying to bring down the regular enemies that occasionally elect to show their disfigured faces.

The exploration side of things, despite the constantly evolving block map on the lower screen, is equally weak. Neat features, like being able to mark the locations of doors you can't yet open and secrets you can't yet reach, are largely pointless when the treasures hidden behind these artificial barriers aren't even worth claiming: secret scrolls merely offer a slight XP boost for an underdeveloped levelling system, bestiary pages offer little more than common-sense analysis of simple enemies you encounter, while health and magic boosts are rendered largely redundant by the fact that the game seems to save checkpoints every time you blink. In most games like this, you'd often kill for a dribble of extra health in order to survive a tough boss battle, but here even the bog-standard meter is enough to allow you to spam your

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Spain
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: MercurySteam
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

WITH THE FRANCHISE'S HISTORY OF PUNISHING PLAYERS IN A FAIR AND CALCULATING WAY, THIS JUST FEELS LIKE A CHEAP SHOT

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?

Probably about ten hours total, including a little sightseeing. Gathering all the junk won't take much longer, either.

Q. NOT A GOOD CASTLEVANIA GAME, THEN?

No. Handheld gamers have been spoiled ever since the GBA games, all of which (plus their DS stablemates) prove more worthwhile than this.

Q. BUT I LOVED LORDS OF SHADOW!

Us too. Hopefully the console sequel will give us more of that, because this in-betweener doesn't satisfy on either side of the *Castlevania* coin.

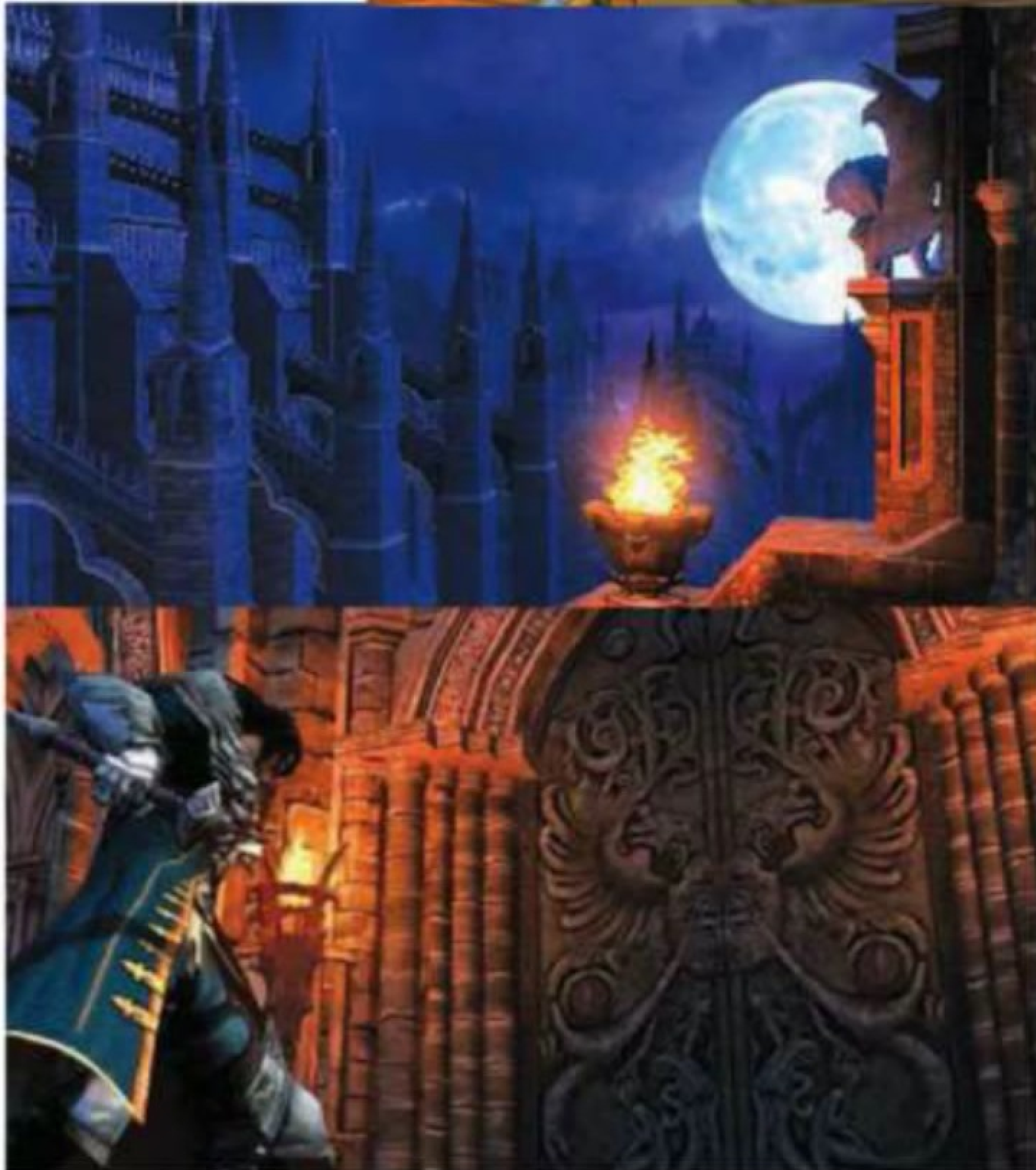




Below: Despite the fact that there are four playable characters, all of them use the exact same whip combos and basic attacks, even though that makes little sense. A bit more variety would have been nice…



Right: A few of the puzzles are kind of interesting. They're the only times you'll need your brain on.



Below: *Mirror Of Fate* looks technically impressive, but after how pretty *Lords Of Shadow* was, all this really shows is that the 3DS can't quite do this world justice.

way through one phase and limp into the next – constant checkpointing meaning you don't even really need to try; you just need to keep attacking.

While the game would like to have you believe that Dracula was the main enemy, he takes second place to mechanics that seem to delight in watching you fail. At least the Lord Of Darkness waits until you reach him to troll you; the deficient and awkward controls do it every time you fail to reach a ledge or platform. It's all so stodgy and false (likely another hangover from translating 3D mechanics into a 2D world) and with the franchise's history of punishing players in a fair and calculating way, this just feels like a cheap shot. Equally lenient checkpointing means you'll seldom lose much ground because of it, but it dampens your faith in the world every time it happens. We can accept failure – we wouldn't be such big *Souls* fans if we couldn't – but we at least like to know that it's our fault when something goes wrong, and that's not something that *Mirror Of Fate* can ever tell you with a straight face.

But even though it isn't really doing enough to live up to its Gothic 2D peers, it seems like *Mirror Of Fate* is trying to do too much. Take the multiple character approach, for instance – a great idea in theory, but one that means you get ripped away from a tool set just as you start to get used to it, in order to re-find and relearn inferior analogues with the next guy. It's not even like you can use one character's powers to reach areas another couldn't easily access; each is locked into their own chapter and, while these frequently intertwine, there's no sense that there's one entire castle to be explored – rather the map is divided into crèches from which the designated playmates cannot escape.

Even graphically, the game is extremely confused. Visuals push the hardware way beyond its limits, as evidenced by the frequently awful frame rate and hit-and-miss use of 3D effects. It should probably be expected from a developer used to dealing with console power, but the cut-scenes (where everyone is inexplicably Scottish) are just plain ugly; the comic book effect is cute and all, but it's like watching a PS2 trying to run *Borderlands* for the most part – and it doesn't fit at all with the rest of the game, wildly at odds with the 2.5D attempt at realism evident elsewhere. Not that it works particularly well either, to be honest; it's seldom clear visually if you can bypass many obstacles, rather just assumed that you'll give up and move on when the same weapon that can smash rock-hard enemies and mince environmental objects somehow fails to dent a couple of planks elsewhere.

Mirror Of Fate is a game confused, one made by people who clearly know how to adapt *Castlevania* for a 3D environment, but have no idea how to do the same with one dimension less. It's neither a terrible game nor one worthy of any real note, a thing that exists rather than a thing people should go out of their way to experience. It seems lazy to play the 'not as good as *Symphony Of The Night*' card, but when you're making a 2D *Castlevania* game it's one you surely have to expect players to be holding, especially when your awkward attempt at a 2D world doesn't even come close to any of the DS or GBA games in terms of quality.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

HORSES FOR COURSES: Gameplay changes slightly in each of the three acts based on the character that takes the spotlight, though the changes are never exactly befitting of the character in question.

THREE'S A CROWD

Each of the three acts gives you a different hero, throwing away former mechanics to make way for new, most of which aren't as useful. When we play as Alucard, we want to get around quicker via back dashing and rinse enemies with broken Shield Rod combos, not play as a zombie whose werewolf form looks like it was drawn by a child. It all just feels like it's trying to please everyone with cameos from across the canon, though none of the Belmonts are portrayed as you might like, nor can you use others' abilities to reach inaccessible areas. Somebody get MercurySteam a copy of Harmony Of Despair…



VERDICT 5/10
FANGS FOR NOTHING

THIS SHIFT IN SIMULATION IS JUST A LITTLE BIT TILTED

SimCity

There's no doubt about it; Maxis's latest *SimCity* is the most considered, most in-depth and most appealing *SimCity* game to date. The tilt-shift aesthetic might be incongruous with fans' expectations, and the overhaul of some fairly radical mechanical elements might scare the most die-hard fans, but that doesn't stop this being the most interesting *SimCity* game yet.

So it's a shame that it comes with just as many criticisms as it does praise; point to any positive aspect of Maxis's city builder and you'll find another equal and opposing negative. It's a game that – though finely honed – is not perfect in structure, which will leave many of the series' most devout players feeling more than a little irritable.

It is worth noting that this is perhaps the most accessible *SimCity* game, too. It's hard to pinpoint why: maybe the colourful and playful sounds and visuals, the pleasing tilt-shift effect as you hone in on a specific part of your fledging town, or perhaps the immediacy and ease of use that comes with the multiple, infographic-themed data layers. Most likely, however, it's a combination of all three.

It's the visuals that first drag you in, however. Not only does this *look* like a game you'll want to play, but it *sounds* like one too. The melodic (and strangely familiar) tunes accompanying *SimCity* are a testament to the sound engineers at Maxis: somehow, someway, they always manage to nail that sense of pure happiness. The sound effects tagged onto each building 'plop', road stretch or click-click-click of zoning help construct this image of *SimCity* as a model of a city rather than a game – while the myriad cheers as a park is placed onto the land not only help inform you of a job well done, they make it feel personal. They make it feel *fun*.

As such, each region in this new *SimCity* is a playground, a toybox of building materials that gives way to genuine creativity. In the past, *SimCity* focused primarily on fitting as many Sims into a space as possible, but here there's so much more freedom to it. Sure, the size of your city's population is one aspect, but maybe you'll target education instead, or perhaps focus on creating a safe and secure environment for all your residents. Tourism, trade, utilities, industry, commercial, residential: all viable specialisations your city can adhere to. Each new city provides a new opportunity, and it'll take a very long time before starting anew becomes tiresome.

What can become a pain, however, is the city size limit. It has been a valid concern for fans throughout the game's development, and after extended time with the final game there's unfortunately no silver lining. But it's not the desire

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER: Maxis
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-16
MINIMUM SPEC: Dual Core 2.0GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, Radeon HD 2400/NVidia 7800, 10GB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Below: A number of optional filters can be applied to your game to give your city a unique feeling or atmosphere. Perfect for anyone that, like us, enjoys taking excessive screenshots of their cities.



ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

RETICULATING SPLINES: The new GlassBox engine is fantastic. It produces the most realistic city simulation to date, and the 3D engine means you can get really up close and personal with your Sims.

Right: In typical 'games are services' fashion, the limit on city sizes is likely to be altered in the future. Maxis has already said that it is looking into the possibility of increase the limit, and we hope so. It needs it.

EACH NEW CITY PROVIDES A NEW OPPORTUNITY, AND IT'LL TAKE A VERY LONG TIME BEFORE STARTING ANEW BECOMES TIRESOME



Left: Zoning still plays an important part in *SimCity*, but how they work together has changed quite radically. **Below:** Disasters are back in abundance, and it seems the option to turn them off has been removed. This is a deal breaker for a number of gamers, so hopefully Maxis will bring the option back soon.

BETTER THAN

SIMCITY SOCIETIES



AS GOOD AS

SIMCITY 4

FAQs

Q. TOO MUCH REGION SPILL?

Generally it's fine, but there can be situations where your city falls apart because of the regional osmosis.

Q. AND IF IT DISCONNECTS?

You're not kicked, thankfully. However, if you quit the game without reconnecting your save isn't updated.

Q. WHAT ABOUT MULTIPLAYER?

For the most part it works fine, the region spill helping a lot with that. It's a shame it's only technically four-player.

CASTLES IN THE SKY



It was a furore that encapsulated *SimCity*'s launch – there's no other word for it. Gamers the world over bit back at EA for enforcing an always-online internet connection, and it did backfire for EA. To the publisher's credit, it went out of its way to rectify many of the server issues, but this did highlight the problems of an always-on DRM future. Even if you wanted to play a single-player game you'd have to queue for at least 30 minutes before getting a second chance to jump into the game. Then there's the high chance of being kicked from your game once you're actually in, with no guarantee that your city has been saved. As we say, all better now – but if you're totally against this form of DRM then we'd suggest avoiding *SimCity* entirely.



to expand beyond the borders that is an issue; it's the lack of space to build within. There might not sound like much difference between the two, but consider this: once you've laid the basic foundation for your city – the roads, the zones and potential spots to build upgraded utilities – you're not left looking to place more; instead you're struggling for space to fill with any necessary structures. Take the need for mass transit: rail connections, buses, streetcars, boats and even airports are the five choices you have, but it's impossible to have all of them.

Forcing choices is an important part of the new *SimCity* and this is just one way in which it provides a challenge, but this can often feel unfairly restrictive, especially when your own citizens demand everything from each and every city you build. Thankfully, the multi-region gameplay resolves some of these issues. Beefing up on police, fire or health coverage in one city nearby can then be volunteered to assist in those severely lacking. If one city is in desperate need of workers, then Sims looking for work in outlying cities will commute over, with the same being true for commercial and residential desires.

As with a lot of aspects to *SimCity*, even this comes with its own downfalls. Firstly, despite suggestions of up to 16 cities working symbiotically together, the truth is that only four will work in tandem. This makes multiplayer particularly restrictive if you're hoping to fill all 16 of those cities. Worst of all is the frustrating crossover, where unrequited parts of one city will filter through to another and the elements you *do* desire don't. While crime and pollution is expected, it is, in fact, education and wealth that prove the biggest threat. You may be focusing on dirty coal or oil production in one city, for example, but all your low-tech industry becomes filled with educated, high-tech Sims from another. This would be fine, but it then causes the inhabitants of the very city you're working on to be put out of work while the high-level tech buildings demand educated workers that never existed in the first place. It's a frustrating balance that could quite easily infect any one of your cities.

A rather crude metaphor for *SimCity*, then, is to call it a sandbox on a see-saw. You're free to play around to your heart's content, but the underlying mechanics aren't always reliable. Though many of the systems pinning the GlassBox engine together can be awkward, they're at the very least always providing an obstacle to overcome. Whether intended or not, the erratic nature of the region play and enforced city limits does make you continually evaluate the options open to you. This turns your game time in a gradual and careful evolution; your environments will grow out of the very ground around you, adapting to the challenges you face or the restrictions placed upon you. This is what *SimCity* really does well, and once you've started it'll be tough to stop.

There's a personality to every city you work on, not only with the individual comings and goings of the Sims within, but with their very design too. Initially, some of the decisions surrounding *SimCity*'s mechanics may seem frustrating, especially for die-hard fans of the series, but give it time and you'll realise – in spite of all of this – that it's actually the best *SimCity* game yet.

VERDICT 8/10

A MASTERPIECE MARRED BY A HANDFUL OF SHORTCOMINGS

Below: Playing on Hard means you lose the reticle that tells you where your bullet will go after wind and drop distance is accounted for. At the very least this makes sniping challenging, but it's still not really engaging.





Above: Multiplayer has promise, but is let down by how the design suffers in less-populated matches, along with the online community being something of a ghost town already.

THE END WOULD BE DISAPPOINTED WITH THIS ONE

Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2

Realism is not *Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2*'s calling card. You might think it should be, given the specialised nature of this first-person shooter, but it's not. Drop distance and wind speed is factored into your shots, but that's as far as realism goes. Sitting guards immediately stand before you stealth kill them, weapons explode into the air after sniping soldiers and, in alert states, the AI loops between 'curiously lean out of cover' and 'run in random direction'.

Satisfying feedback is not *Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2*'s calling card. Sniping is too easy on default difficulty thanks to a red reticle showing exactly where your bullet will travel, and the actual kills themselves pass without any impact. While *Sniper Elite V2* gave up any pretence of being an actual game in favour of its gory, near-pornographic killcams that were almost built for YouTube montages, *Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2* works as neither kill montage carnival nor game. Snipe a guard and his body will crumple in a way that's more boneless chicken than human form.

Freedom is not *Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2*'s calling card. Missions often see you guided around a series of linear paths by a spotter, a voice in your ear or a floating objective marker, before being told in which order to take out targets. There's almost no variation in what you do – travel to point A, shoot these targets, create a distraction, shoot remaining targets. Sniper battles help liven things up somewhat, but the only reason they're interesting is because they're rare moments where you're asked to do something different.

Multiplayer is not *Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2*'s calling card. It shows some initial promise, as the sniping focus makes ordinary team deathmatch a surprisingly tense affair. Unlike single-player, kills are meaningful, as you can spend anywhere up to ten minutes patiently waiting for a player to peek out of cover. It's slow paced, but that's what makes it unique and engaging.

Yet, unless you're in a full match, there aren't enough players on either side who can pick off suicidal runs to the opposing team's side of the map, and close encounters between players reduce the multiplayer to a messy, ugly FPS. If matches were full this wouldn't be an issue, as both teams would have enough sniper rifles trained on the middle of the map to pick these players off, but the online community is hardly thriving, even this soon after launch. The other problem is that there is only one mode to play (team deathmatch) and only two maps. Ouch.

That leaves an extremely underwhelming package where the main campaign barely troubles the five-hour mark, and multiplayer is devoid of modes and players. But the bigger issue is that the sniping itself just isn't engaging enough to build an entire game around. When sniping in games like *Battlefield 3* and even *Black Ops 2* is more enjoyable than *Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2*, you know something has gone horribly wrong.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PC
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: City Interactive
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-12
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

HEADSHOT



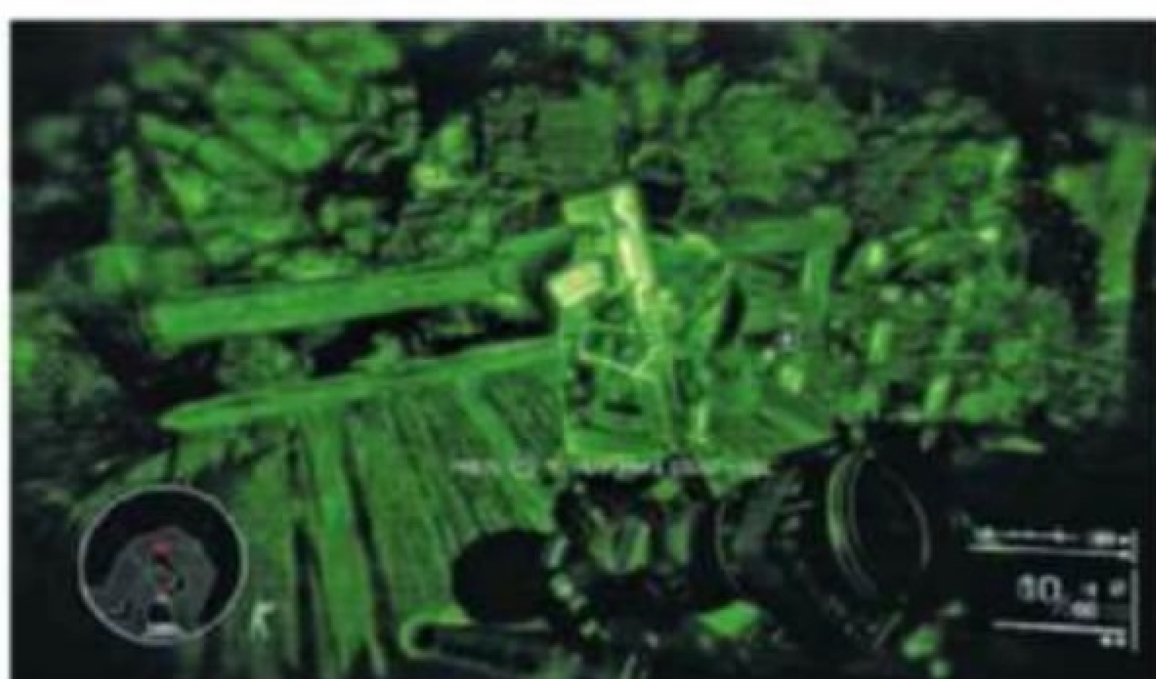
WORSE THAN

SNIPER ELITE V2

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

PURE SNIPING: The main improvement over the original is that the missions here are all focused on sniping, with no more 'running around with a machine gun' levels.





VERDICT 3/10

NOT NEARLY ENGAGING, SATISFYING OR INTERESTING ENOUGH

MILESTONE TAKES A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF ITS LIKABLE RALLY SERIES, WITH MIXED RESULTS

WRC Powerslide



Above: *WRC Powerslide* certainly looks the business for a Live Arcade title, but the beauty is only skin deep.



Below: While the transition to XBLA is welcome, it feels undernourished compared to its retail predecessors.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360 (XBLA)
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Italy
PUBLISHER: Milestone
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: 1,200 MS Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



When Evolution Studios created *MotorStorm RC* for the PlayStation 3 and Vita, it was hailed as a fun diversion from the main series. Its success may have rubbed off on Italian studio Milestone, which has cooked up a similar offering based on its WRC line of rally racers. Sadly, beyond some appealing graphics and tight handling, *WRC Powerslide* isn't anywhere near as successful as Evolution's effort.

The most obvious problem is the bird's-eye perspective from which the game is viewed. The camera hovers above the track like a hyperactive helicopter, attempting to keep pace with the twists and turns of the course below. It performs an acceptable job on the more straightforward tracks, but when you unlock some of the hairpin-packed locations, the constant movement is almost nauseating and makes you wish for the more traditional behind-the-car viewpoint.

Next up is the puzzling lack of pace. While off-road competition is obviously slower than most track-based racing disciplines, *WRC Powerslide* still feels far too pedestrian to get the pulse pumping. In lieu of speed, Milestone has tried valiantly to inject a little bit of excitement by adding power-up weapons such as thunder strikes and hailstorms, but by trying to keep these items as true-to-life as possible, they are robbed of any potency and end up feeling a little half-hearted.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

A NEW PERSPECTIVE: The erratic in-game camera is sometimes too disorientating. The game also needs some speed – it's badly in need of a rocket up the backside.

Finally, there's the monotonous manner in which new events are unlocked. It's often necessary to replay the same course several times over in order to gain access to new content. If the game were suitably addictive and riveting this wouldn't be as big an issue, but when getting through each race is already akin to pulling teeth, doing it again several times over feels like torture.

It's a shame that *WRC Powerslide* makes such fundamental errors, because it gets a lot of other things right. The visuals are fantastic and seem to provide the only justifiable excuse for using a bird's-eye view of the action. From the rolling Welsh hills to the dusty Portuguese countryside, the graphics engine never puts a wheel off the road. The game's handling also deserves some praise; despite the slow nature of the cars, they do at least feel like they're driving convincingly. Online play is also well implemented, with four-player contests relatively easy to hop in and out of.

There's definitely room in the download market for a top-down racer in the spirit of past classics like *Super Skidmarks* and *Micro Machines*, but that void has arguably been filled by the aforementioned *MotorStorm RC*. *WRC Powerslide* is a well-intentioned stab at achieving the same glory, but aside from some appealing aesthetics and agreeable handling, it fails to pass muster in practically every other regard.



Above: It's fair to say that multiplayer is entertaining, but the heft of the vehicles provides a mild annoyance during races.

VERDICT 5/10
ENDS UP OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

CREATE THE ART OF THE FUTURE

www.3dartistonline.com

3DArtist

Available from all good newsagents and supermarkets

FREE DISC EVERY ISSUE

ON SALE NOW:

> Photoreal 3D > Arch-vis > Visual effects > Animation > 3D printing

TUTORIALS

INTERVIEWS

INDUSTRY INSIGHT

BEGINNER ADVICE

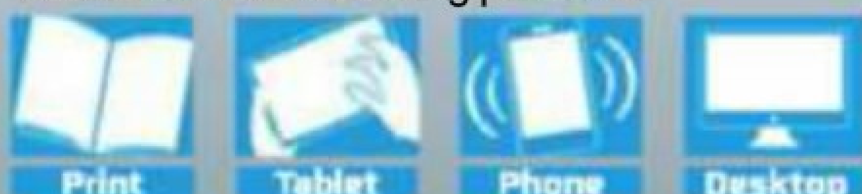
EXPERT GUIDES

BUY YOUR ISSUE TODAY

Print edition available at www.imagineshop.co.uk

Digital edition available at www.greatdigitalmags.com

Available on the following platforms




facebook.com/3DArtistMagazine


twitter.com/3DArtist

IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE WOODS TODAY...

Year Walk





Above: *Year Walk*'s companion app should not be ignored; not only does it provide you with clues (though they're still very cryptic), but it holds secrets of its own. To experience the full horror of *Year Walk* you should get hold of both.

You don't expect to find a horror experience on the App Store and you certainly don't expect it to be quite so genuinely unnerving, affecting and requiring of intelligent thought, but *Year Walk* surprises on almost every level. Using Swedish folklore as its inspiration, the 'Year Walk' of its title is supposedly the rite of passage a person could undertake with the intention of witnessing the future.

Along their journey, these Year Walkers would find themselves dealing with folklore's nastier creatures, presented here in an otherworldly dream-like fashion that's as disturbing as it is intriguing. To fully understand *Year Walk*, though, a companion app is also available (for free), and it's the ways in which the story criss-crosses the two that's by far and away the most impressive aspect of *Year Walk*'s gameplay. This has all the hallmarks of a classic horror game, presented neatly and economically on your iPhone or iPad.

It really is brilliant and is only let down by its limited interface and short playtime. *Year Walk* presents a snowy Swedish landscape that players can explore. Locations evoke a sense of dread, and investigating the world and its puzzles requires players to pay attention to the companion app, which details Sweden's sometimes scary folklore and disturbing creatures.

It's not just *Year Walk*'s impressive use of the horror genre that gets under your skin; it's the creepy visual design and the way it asks players to interact with its world that leaves a lasting impression. Its failure to hold your hand, give hints or aid players in any way also brings back a certain sense of accomplishment when you complete a task.

Puzzles are difficult, but come with an ingrained, if warped, sense of logic, and the whole thing is rounded off with one of the most terrifying denouements, something we rarely see in triple-A console games, let alone one that you can play on your phone. The only let-down is the fact that *Year Walk*, though rekindling our love for the point-and-click adventure, is a linear experience and leads players by the nose. Working out its more than cryptic puzzles is a significant challenge, but reach its climax (and the final foreboding conclusion) and there's no reason to return.

Year Walk is also presented in a linear visual fashion that, though it is used effectively, creates a repetitive and – if you're able to rush past its puzzles – rather brief experience. But none of this should take away from what is a monumental and truly frightening game that packs more innovation and ideas into the horror genre than we've seen from 'traditional' games for some time. Just like *Slender*, *Year Walk* is a surprise, and one that, like any good horror game, will leave you feeling unsettled for days after its completion.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Simogo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £2.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — SILENT HILL: THE ESCAPE



AS GOOD AS — PAPA SANGRE

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

THE HORROR: The freedom it gives players to engage with the world is part of what makes it so unsettling. You need to dig more than usual to uncover the true mystery and its disturbing outcome.

VERDICT 7/10

WE'VE SEEN THE FUTURE

Below: *Year Walk*'s minimalist art style perfectly evokes a sense of dread, which is further amplified with the games' eerie sounds and folio design. You'll need headphones and a dark room, but the chilling effect makes it more than worth it.







SPECIAL USA SUBS OFFER

$94 For 13 issues

Never miss another issue

- 164 pages of multiformat gaming content
- Dedicated retro section
- Receive your copy before it goes on sale in stores
- Save 27%* when you subscribe today
- Money-back guarantee

TO SUBSCRIBE

Online www.imaginesubs.co.uk/gtm

and quote USA3

Telephone +44 (0) 1795 592 864

T&Cs: You will actually be charged £60 sterling for an annual subscription. This is equivalent to $94 at the time of writing, although the exchange rate may vary. Your subscription will start from the next available issue and run for 13 issues. *The 27% saving refers to the newsstand price of $9.99 for 13 issues being $129.87, compared with $94 for a subscription. This offer expires 31 July 2013.



Left: Each ally has a unique special attack that can be used once the associated meter fills. Some are way more useful than others, making it pretty easy to put together a party that works.

GUST TURNS BASE METALS INTO A BOG-STANDARD JRPG

Atelier Ayesha: The Alchemist Of Dusk

Come with us, if you will, to a very strange place. A place populated by impossibly pretty girls and impossibly handsome men. A place where bread can be made out of pollen, some beans and a bit of a bear. A place where the baker is so terrifyingly passionate about bread that you have to wonder what he uses to put the holes in his doughnuts. A place where the local item contest can be won time and time again by simply showing off a stuffed toy. In this strange place lives Ayesha, an apothecary whose sister has been 'spirited away', leading her to hone her alchemical skills and head off in search of a way to bring her little sis back. And… well, that's it.

This morsel of narrative is stretched to breaking point across one of the most padded-out JRPGs we've encountered in a long time, and all but the most devoted players will lose interest long before Ayesha and Nio are inevitably reunited.

It's a shame, too, because the actual alchemy stuff is really neat. Intricate and supremely flexible, the well-designed system lets you create and augment all manner of tat to make life easier, so it's disappointing that there isn't more to do with it all. Locations are picked from the simple cardboard cutout world map, each a tiny location to explore and harvest before moving onto the next. The fact that there are about two fights in the first few hours should tell you that the focus isn't on combat here, though the battle system – while old-fashioned – is actually pretty good. Unique support actions for all of the recruitable characters add strategy to longer battles, although Ayesha's MP meter seems to be exclusively used to power certain crafted items. Oh, and palette-swap haters need not apply; there are only eight enemy types in the entire game (plus a couple of bosses), each reused over and over with a different lick of paint.

So what's the point, then? Honestly, we're still not sure. It's almost more dating/life sim than RPG, repeatedly forcing you into protracted conversations with characters you probably detest as you do all kinds of odd jobs and fetch quests, with zero sense of urgency for the small matter of the missing sister. This aspect of the game would be far more enjoyable were it not for the cast of cliches, arseholes and idiots; there are precious few characters in this world that have more than a single dimension to them. And while decent battle mechanics and a nifty crafting system might be enough to see some through to the credits, a weekend with *Ayesha* will leave everyone else feeling bored, embarrassed and a little bit dirty.

VERDICT 4/10
DIRECTIONLESS OTAKU FODDER

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Tecmo Koei
DEVELOPER: Gust
PRICE: 39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

NOW WHAT?: Travel is often interrupted by meandering conversations about nothing. When you're playing an RPG and groaning every time dialogue begins, you know it's doing something wrong.





Above: Memories can be recorded in the diary, each unlocking passive enhancements and perks that improve Ayesha and her allies.



Left: Blizzard has always had the best concept art around, yet it increasingly contrasts with the cartoonish simplicity of its RTS world.

THE MOST POPULAR STRATEGY GAME IN THE WORLD EXPANDS

StarCraft II: Heart Of The Swarm

At the time, Blizzard's decision to split *StarCraft II* into three parts seemed cynical. After all, both *StarCraft* and its expansion pack *StarCraft: Brood War* had managed to have three campaigns, addressing each of the series' factions.

But this is Blizzard we're dealing with here, a company that rams its games full of po-faced serious plots then undermines them with Easter eggs and one-liners. No other company, perhaps save for Valve, spends so much time polishing its games. If any developer can turn a cheeky business idea into something worthwhile, Blizzard can.

The multiplayer is the key part of *Heart Of The Swarm*; after all, it was the multiplayer that kept the original *StarCraft* going in the long hiatus when Blizzard was only working on *World Of Warcraft*. The expansion introduces six or seven new multiplayer units (depending on how you're counting). The Terrans get Hellbats and Widow Mines, giving them even more mobile troops and defenses. The Zerg get the Viper (a flying formation breaker and debuffer) and the Swarm Host (a complex mobile turret), giving them flexibility in getting though set defenses. And the Protoss get three new flying units that improve their early game chances of survival.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activison-Blizzard
DEVELOPER: Blizzard
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

So, given the changes to the multiplayer, how does the single-player contrast? Well, it's set immediately after the events of *Wings Of Liberty*. The one-time Queen Of Blades, Sarah Kerrigan, has been de-infested of the Zerg presence, leaving her merely as a very strong psychic. Yet when Jim Raynor, the rebel biker space-cowboy who saved her, is seemingly killed by their enemies, she goes loco and starts putting the Zerg swarm back together. Cue another campaign that's almost identical to *Wings Of Liberty*, with Kerrigan travelling the galactic sector, slowly reacquiring mostly familiar units and allies, before a cheesy denouement.

Like *Wings Of Liberty*, the story is told at multiple levels: firstly, of course, through Blizzard's traditional isometric strategy perspective, which the developer has used for *StarCraft*, *Diablo* and *Warcraft* since the year dot; secondly, through conversations with Kerrigan's team of unique Zerg (which take place in the mouth of her Leviathan, a monstrously large interstellar Zerg); and finally, through animated cut-scenes, which take up a surprisingly large amount of playtime.

Indeed, it's terrifying how much of the game's budget must have gone on these cut-scenes. They seek to make the game a blockbuster, with fast action and amazing vistas in a universe full of clichés. They wouldn't look out of place in an animated movie, which is great until they're undermined when

FOR AN OLD-FASHIONED STARCRAFT PLAYER, HEART OF THE SWARM IS AN OLD-FASHIONED EXPANSION

FAQs

Q. DO I NEED THE FIRST GAME?
Yes, you need *Wings Of Liberty* to play this game.

Q. WHEN'S THE FINAL PART OUT?
The third part has no announced release date – but we'd bet our bottom dollar that it's not the final part.

Q. WILL THERE EVER BE A CONSOLE PORT OF STARCRAFT II AND ITS EXPANSIONS?
You can never say never, but Blizzard has no current plans to bring *StarCraft II* to consoles.





Left: The gruesome spacecraft invasion mission is a direct *Alien* parody, with a little of *The Blob* thrown in. Kerrigan's larva sneaks aboard a fleeing spacecraft inside an unfortunate Protoss and uses the ship's crew as biomass.



Right: Zagara is a brood mother, an independent intelligence created by the Queen Of Blades that heads up a fragment of the Zerg swarm.



Below: If you want to select all your fighting units at once, the F2 key is your friend.

you drop back into a real-time strategy game on a 2D plane, where victory is mostly about fast clicking.

Anyway, we follow Kerrigan as she flits from planet to planet building up her team and killing half the population of a galaxy as she seeks to save Jim Raynor. Saving the galaxy definitely takes something of a back seat in this one. Each planet tends to offer three full missions and up to two tiny evolution missions, giving the game around 18-27 missions in total.

Those evolution missions are given in the Evolution Pit by Agathur. Despite his name, he's not someone's maiden aunt, but instead a spidery sausage-shaped object straight out of HR Giger's nastiest doodles. The evolution missions are short two-stage affairs, where you take control of two types of isolated Zerg strains on distant planets who have developed new abilities. So, for example, the Roach strains are the debuffing Lurker and broodling-spawning Corpser. Once you've played with them for a bit, you get to decide which one of the pair you'll upgrade to permanently.

Those aren't the only upgrades your units get. Each one also has three options that can be chosen before every mission, which make equally fundamental alterations in their behaviour – making Zerglings run 60 per cent faster or attack 50 per cent faster, or have more health, for example. Obviously, you upgrade them in each level, too.

On top of all of that, Kerrigan herself unlocks upgrades as the game goes on, by performing sub-missions on each level (this is explained as finding new DNA strains in each level, but it rarely works that way). Some of the upgrades are to her, some are to the economy, but it's all portrayed as her levelling up. It's all a linear slog and most players will end up with a fully upgraded Kerrigan for the last mission, but the illusion of progression feels convincing.

Indeed, as the RTS goes on, Kerrigan operates more and more to the fore of her forces. Unlike *Wings Of Liberty*'s Raynor, she's tough and deadly, and can end up killing more enemies than almost any other unit with a nice array of powers at her disposal – as well as unlocking other super-upgrades for the swarm, such as insta-spawning Overlords or Zerglings.

Not that she's playable in every level. Though she figures in many of the more open levels, the conceptual levels – such as a dull spaceship battle, an *Alien* parody or a battle of wills between Kerrigan and a human psychic – add variety to the mix. Add in varied side objectives on different difficulty levels and an array of weird worlds to visit, and there's a lot of replay value here, even if the game will be quite similar each time.

Of course, there are other game modes, too. The AI skirmish mode is great training for the full multiplayer experience (and is pretty good fun in co-op), while the challenge modes let you become more expert with other elements of controlling particular units. Neither of these have seen huge updates, but then this all underlines that Blizzard's strategy game plan hasn't changed much since *Warcraft III*, save for getting shinier.

For an old-fashioned *StarCraft* player, *Heart Of The Swarm* is an old-fashioned expansion. It changes up the multiplayer just enough and adds a simple, throwaway campaign story that's enjoyable to play. It won't set the world on fire – but then, that's Kerrigan's job after all.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

NASTY CUT: At one time, Kerrigan's brood mothers were meant to give the player the choice of destroying planets for unit upgrades, but now you just see these planets in pointless cut-scenes.

SINGLE SERVER

We don't feel we can review the multiplayer sufficiently at this time, both in terms of how it will change in the medium term and how the community will adapt to it. What we can say is that we welcome Blizzard's introduction of new tutorials, which hold a new player's hand during the transition from campaign play to ranked multiplayer. There are several other tweaks that should improve multiplayer for pros and newbies, such as taking over replays, better stat tracking and global play, but these could easily have been delivered in a patch, rather than an expansion.



BETTER THAN: DIABLO III

WORSE THAN: SUPREME COMMANDER 2

VERDICT 7/10
MONSTROUSLY POLISHED, BUT VERY SAFE.

THE BIGGEST, BEST-LOOKING INDIE GAME YET COMES FROM AN UNKNOWN STUDIO

Hawken



Though the developers claim *Hawken* is in 'open beta', we're reviewing it now because they're charging real money to players for in-game purchases, they're not planning on resetting the servers and you need buying advice.

Four maps. Ten giant robots. Four game modes. Free-to-play. 7/10. That's it. Story told, game over, let's all go home.

Hawken is much more than that, of course. It's one of the most original-looking things we've seen for a long time, which also happens to be from a genre almost no one makes any more. And it's free-to-play. *Hawken* is one of gaming's possible futures, so it's a game we need to pay closer attention to than our shopping list up there would suggest.

Like *Tribes: Ascend*, *Planetside* and the new *Tomb Raider*, the game glories in verticality, balanced neatly by these great lumbering mechs having ninja-level agility. All mechs have a limited and continuously recharging fuel supply, used for boosting, jet-packing and dodging. Hold down Shift+Left or Right Arrow, and they'll use fuel to leap that way instantly before reverting to their usual plodding selves. Hold down Shift+Forward Arrow, and they'll boost at high speed. Hold down Shift+Back Arrow, and they'll turn instantly on the spot – very useful when being attacked from the rear or attempting to flee, not so useful in heated battles when you suddenly find yourself facing the wrong way.

Beyond that, the game is more *Call Of Duty* than *MechWarrior*. There's no location damage here and minimal heat management. Your mechs are fantastically responsive and balletic, dancing around each other in firefights, but there's none of the staggering impacts you'd expect from heavy guns or rockets. Yet, even though it's not 'mechy' along traditional lines, the combat is hugely enjoyable and chaotic. As your fingers acclimatise to the keyboard layout and the movement constraints of the robots and levels, you learn to fling your mech around quickly.

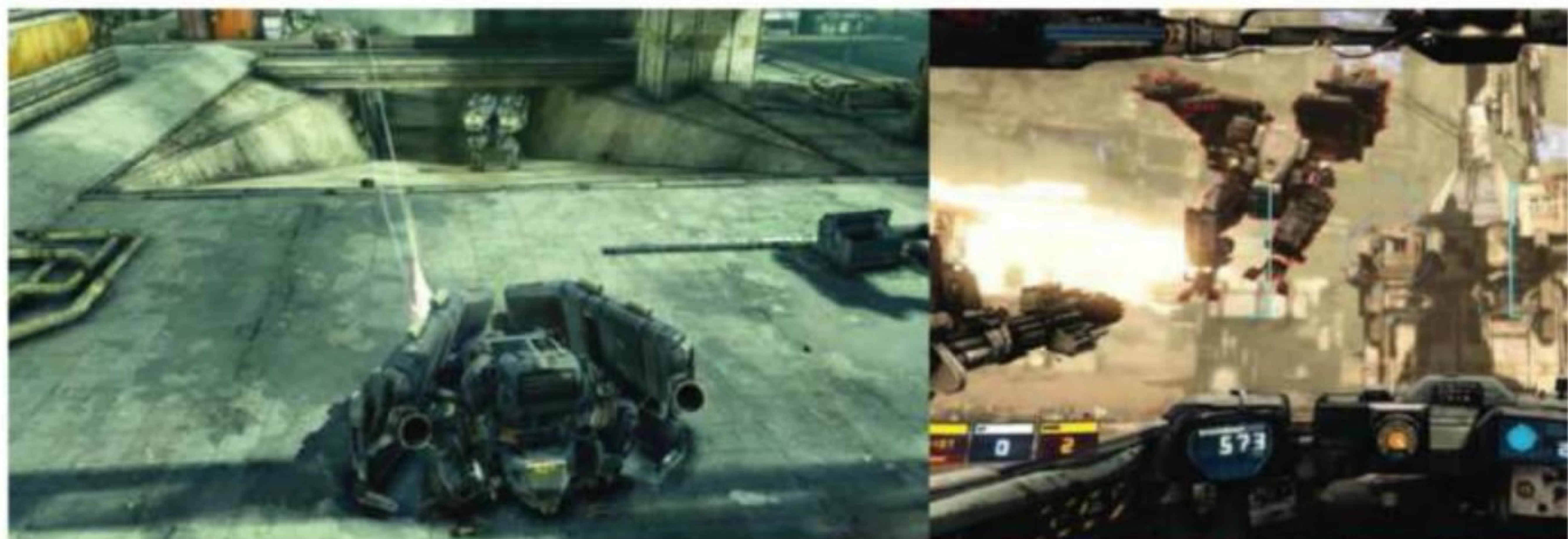
While the HUD is delightful, it's not particularly user-friendly. Midway through a fight we often completely lost track of how much damage we had taken, and couldn't take the time to search the dashboard and see. It's more common to wait for the critical damage audio cue and hit the fast-reverse button.

Despite that flaw, we can't help but love the visuals. Playing the game – even on a low-end rig – is spectacular. The design team has gone back and looked at Seventies artists like Moebius and H R Giger in the design of both the cities and the mechs. Stop to look around, and you're dead. Carry on looking anyway, and you get to see a fantastic dilapidated city, straight out of *The Fifth Element* or *Akira*, replete with neon signs, shops and abandoned cars. The back story is never explained, but when you realise you just stepped on a truck, you get a sense of the game's implied scale.

Of course, the look of a level is separate from the layout of a level, and it's interesting how

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Meteor Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Adhesive Games
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 3-12
MINIMUM SPEC: 2GHz, 3GB RAM, 512MB graphics card with shader model 3.0, Windows XP, broadband
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Below: Each mech has two deployables: one offensive – such as a turret – and one defensive, like a shield or hologram. The Q key marks enemies on the mini-map, which can be decisive in team games.



Right: Scout and Infiltrator mechs currently head up the leaderboards, but that could all change in the balancing.

STOP TO LOOK AROUND, AND YOU'RE DEAD. CARRY ON LOOKING ANYWAY, AND YOU GET TO SEE A FANTASTIC DILAPIDATED CITY



Left: Each mech has a single special ability triggered by the F key. These range from the obscure (removing heat build-up) to the defensive (locking down into a high-damage, high-defense, low mobility state). Below: The basic weaponry of the CR-T mech is more than good enough to kill any opponent. On the left, one of three progressively shorter-ranged but more damaging machine guns; on the right, the TOW rocket launcher, which can be remotely detonated.





BETTER THAN
ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES

WORSE THAN
PLANETSIDE 2

FAQs

Q. IS IT TOTALLY FREE?
Yep, but you only have access to a limited portion of the game.

Q. WHAT'S THE LEARNING CURVE LIKE?
You'll be up and playing within ten minutes. Play the tutorial.

Q. IS THIS ANYTHING LIKE ROBOT WARS?
No, though you can rename your mech Sir Killalot and imagine Craig Charles' voice if you want.



THE TECH OF THE MECH

Genres are born out of single games, but those single games don't come from nowhere. Mech games originate from *MechWarrior*, itself from the *Battletech* series of tabletop games created by FASA in 1984. From these came the standard strategy-heavy mech games, where players spent more time battling their own robot's overheating and potential nuclear meltdown than the other mechs.

In terms of perspective, these early mech games drew on the first-person perspective pioneered by Ed Rotberg's *Battlezone*, a hugely innovative game that is also considered the first virtual reality machine. From this, they also drew the RTS elements that surfaced in later games, such as the hideously difficult *MechCommander*, and peaked in the amazing white elephant that was the *Steel Battalion* controller.



Adhesive has brought the two together. The four levels are differing forms of decayed tech, with associated gameplay modes and idiosyncrasies. For example, Bazaar is a low desert level replete with long lines of sight for sniper mechs to enjoy, and high walls that carve the level into three chunks. Uptown and Prosk are vertical multilevel battlefields based around heavy metal cityscapes, and Origin is another rusty cityscape packed with jump pads.

The way mechs look isn't tied to their abilities because, as we saw with *Chromehounds* that leads to everyone having the same mech. Instead, they have certain classes (light, medium, heavy) with four robots in each, and class-associated weaponry effective at different ranges. As you level up you unlock the ability to add different sorts of upgrades to it, with around seven upgradeable slots. There are several items for each slot, almost all of which need paying for.

To pay for these items you need one of the two forms of currency: the in-game *Hawken* credits that require many hours of play for a new mech, and Meteor credits, which round out at about £2.50 for a new mech. A new weapon or piece of kit is about a third to two thirds of the price of a mech. We estimate you could unlock all the items in the game for less than £50 if you wanted.

It's worth noting that levelling up is locked to each mech, and that it also lets you add minor bonuses to their abilities. Our venerable CR-T is nicely buffed to bump up its damage output and fire rate, and can dodge super fast; but if it gets trapped in anyone's sights it's done for. At the moment you can reset your skill tree for free, so between matches you can change the setup of a mech with ease. You can also switch between all your unlocked mechs mid-match, though you can't edit their abilities.

Talking of the CR-T, this starting mech is a (literal) joke; as its name suggests, it's designed to look like a broken TV. It's also the only one new players can use; to unlock another mech and level it up would take ages. Two other mechs are rotated to be available for free trials at any time, but these trials only last an hour and you can't upgrade the mech. Thankfully, the CR-T is secretly one of the better-rounded mechs on offer, so free players aren't actually too disadvantaged in terms of firepower – just in terms of variety.

Unfortunately, the game's currently bugged matchmaking seems determined to set newbies against veterans; as there's no server browser or dedicated servers, you have no choice. *Hawken* is unfinished, we know. The company has promised to fix the game's bugs, and is doing so. They're also looking further afield, making comics, TV shows and a feature film. Very ambitious, but we'd urge them to concentrate on the game; with poor matchmaking, few maps, overly simple game modes and a limited free game, players might not stick around. And that would be a shame.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

CONSOLE YOURSELF: At the moment, *Hawken* is only on PC, presumably waiting for the next-generation consoles to arrive. Not that we're entirely convinced they could even run it…

VERDICT 7/10
UNIQUELY BEAUTIFUL, BUT TOO LITTLE FOR FREE PLAYERS

Below: One of the newer moves is a loop-the-loop that can be pulled off by holding the right analogue stick. It doesn't feel very natural though and takes a while to get used to.





DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS Vita, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii U
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Gaijin Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: OS: WinXP SP3, Memory: 2GB, Graphics: GeForce 8 series or Radeon HD4 series, DirectX: 9.0c, Hard Drive: 850MB free
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

GAIJIN GAMES LAYS DOWN THE BEATS WITH ITS SLICK MUSIC-BASED PLATFORMER

Bit.Trip Presents… Runner2: Future Legend Of Rhythm Alien

***Bit.Trip Runner* always felt like Gaijin Games' premier title, so it's fitting that the developer has gone all out for this highly enjoyable sequel.** Despite its indie credentials, Gaijin's sequel takes its cue from triple-A releases, adopting a 'bigger, better, faster, more' approach. It works brilliantly, effortlessly building upon the musical-based gameplay mechanics of the original release, but adding a slew of interesting new features.

Indeed, at times Gaijin Games' new release can feel more than a little bewildering, as it gives you so many more options than the 2010 original. You're still endlessly running through beautifully constructed worlds – now given a pleasing plastic aesthetic that immediately sets it apart from the retro-tinged original – but you have far more moves at your proposal. You're eased in gently at first – a sliding kick here, a handy block there – but it soon combines into a devilish concoction that requires steady nerves and even steadier reflexes on the later levels.

One downside to these additional moves is that they don't always flow together as well as the original ones did, meaning you'll sometimes make a fumble as you take on all the new options available to you. Interestingly though, *Runner2* is far more accessible than its predecessor, offering handy checkpoints that split up each stage, allowing you to get used to those additional controls. A further nice touch is that these checkpoints can be jumped over, giving you a bigger reward at the end of a stage. Then there are the branching stages, the unlockable characters and their new skins, and a smattering of *Pitfall!*-styled retro games to race through. In short, *Runner2* has something for everyone, and it's refreshing to see a developer take so much care in building up a sequel and taking it to its logical conclusion.

The original *Bit.Trip Runner* was let down by its simple scoring structure, something Gaijin has greatly improved for the sequel. Commander Video (or whichever one of his wacky friends you choose to play as) can now dance, which locks him into a set animation. Continually pull this move off and you'll greatly boost your score, but it's at the expense of character control. It's a great risk/reward mechanic that helps turn *Runner2* into a credible score chaser.

Less impressive are the occasional difficulty spikes that can hit you, but even these are often bypassed thanks to the three difficultly levels now available. Interestingly, these levels vary completely in layout depending on their complexity, meaning you're effectively getting three games in one. *Runner2* is a game that keeps on giving, with a flexibility and accessibility that allows any level of gamer to enjoy it.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

CHOICES, CHOICES: *Runner2* features multiple paths on certain levels, with additional stages that get unlocked once you earn a set amount of gold bars. There are over 100 stages in total.

BIT.TRIP RUNNER

BETTER THAN



AS GOOD AS

ROBOT UNICORN ATTACK



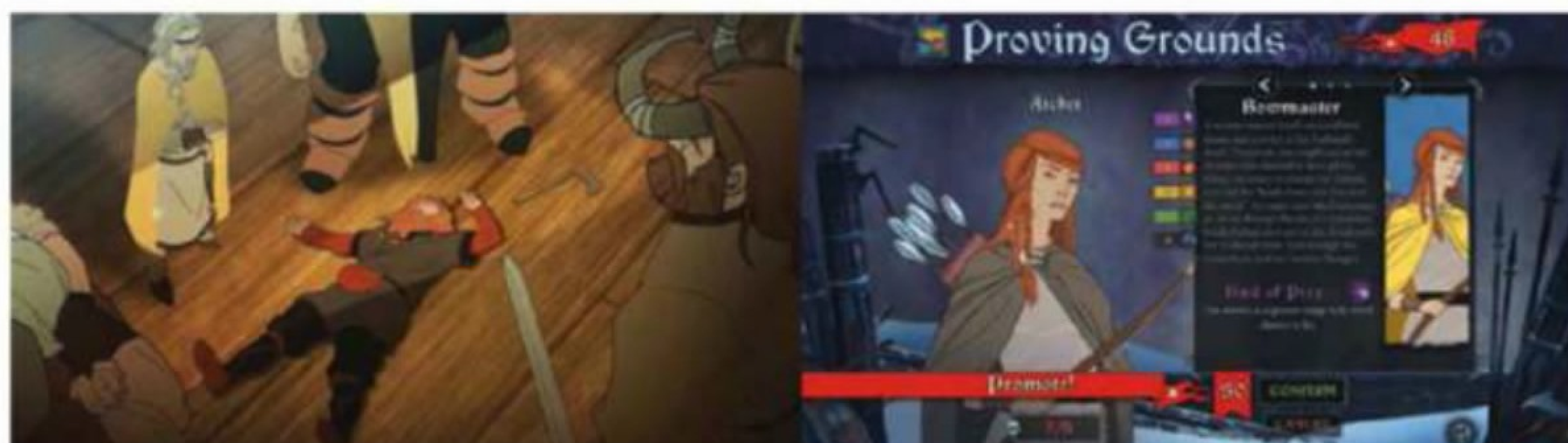


VERDICT 8/10
AN EXCELLENT SEQUEL FULL OF FRESH IDEAS

YOU HAVE MY SWORD, MY AXE AND MY… MICROTRANSACTIONS?

The Banner Saga: Factions

Below: 'Renown' is the microtransaction currency here, and though it can be used to purchase useless unit palette swaps, the real benefit is in purchasing new units and upgrades. You can still earn enough from a handful of games, however.



Here's a weird one. You may have heard of *The Banner Saga*. The Kickstarter project smashed its goal around the same time *Double Fine's Adventure* made the crowd-funding site popular… but this isn't that. *The Banner Saga: Factions* is a free-to-play, multiplayer-only spin-off of the game still in development, aiming to bring a slice of strategic combat to PC gamers ahead of whenever its bigger brother will actually launch.

In that sense, *The Banner Saga: Factions* should be deemed a glimmer of what you might hope to play when the single-player version does release, and if the intro is anything to go by we're in for a real treat. Outside of the initial slice of storyline, however, there's nothing pinning the game together; this is about little more than deep combat.

You'll manage a group of six units picked from a selection of four class types. These classes will play an important part in *Factions*' combat and the overall strategy you settle on, whether it's the defensive Shieldbangers, aggressive Warriors, ranged Archers or jack-of-all-trades in the Raiders. You'd be forgiven for thinking *Factions* is a simple strategy game. Not so. The depth comes with the very specific uses of each class and careful positioning to ensure you're not only one step ahead of your opponent, but also that the match is balanced towards your particular play-style. A favourite early tactic seems to be a defensive one, keeping your Archers at the back protected by the larger Vahl (giant) classes.

There's more, though. A unit has two vitals: armour and health. Armour, unsurprisingly, lowers the damage you receive; chip away at this and any future attacks will deal more damage. Assault a unit's health, however, and it reduces the damage that unit is capable of. This results in a finely honed balancing act, meaning you'll need to know when to attack armour and when to go for the kill. Best of all is its adaptability; personal strategies are just as viable as any other.

Add this to a bank of ability points to enhance movement and attack damage, specialised classes (unlocked after a certain number of kills) and the ability to tweak unit stats to an uncanny degree, and you're left with a strategy game as deep as it is balanced. Few can match *The Banner Saga: Factions*' combination of depth *and* freedom.

The only criticism – and we use the term loosely – is that, at this point in time, *Factions* is fairly limited. There's little beyond the personal thrill of a close match to bring you back to the game, while some features are yet to be even implemented. Units can currently only be promoted once, for example, meaning future kills are essentially wasted. Ultimately, though, this is a soft launch of a free-to-play game with an already very solid base to build upon. Strategy fans and PC gamers alike owe it to themselves to at least give this a try.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Stoic Studio
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free-to-play
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 2
MINIMUM SPEC: 1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 1GB GPU
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
POKÉMON CONQUEST



WORSE THAN
MIGHT & MAGIC: CLASH OF HEROES

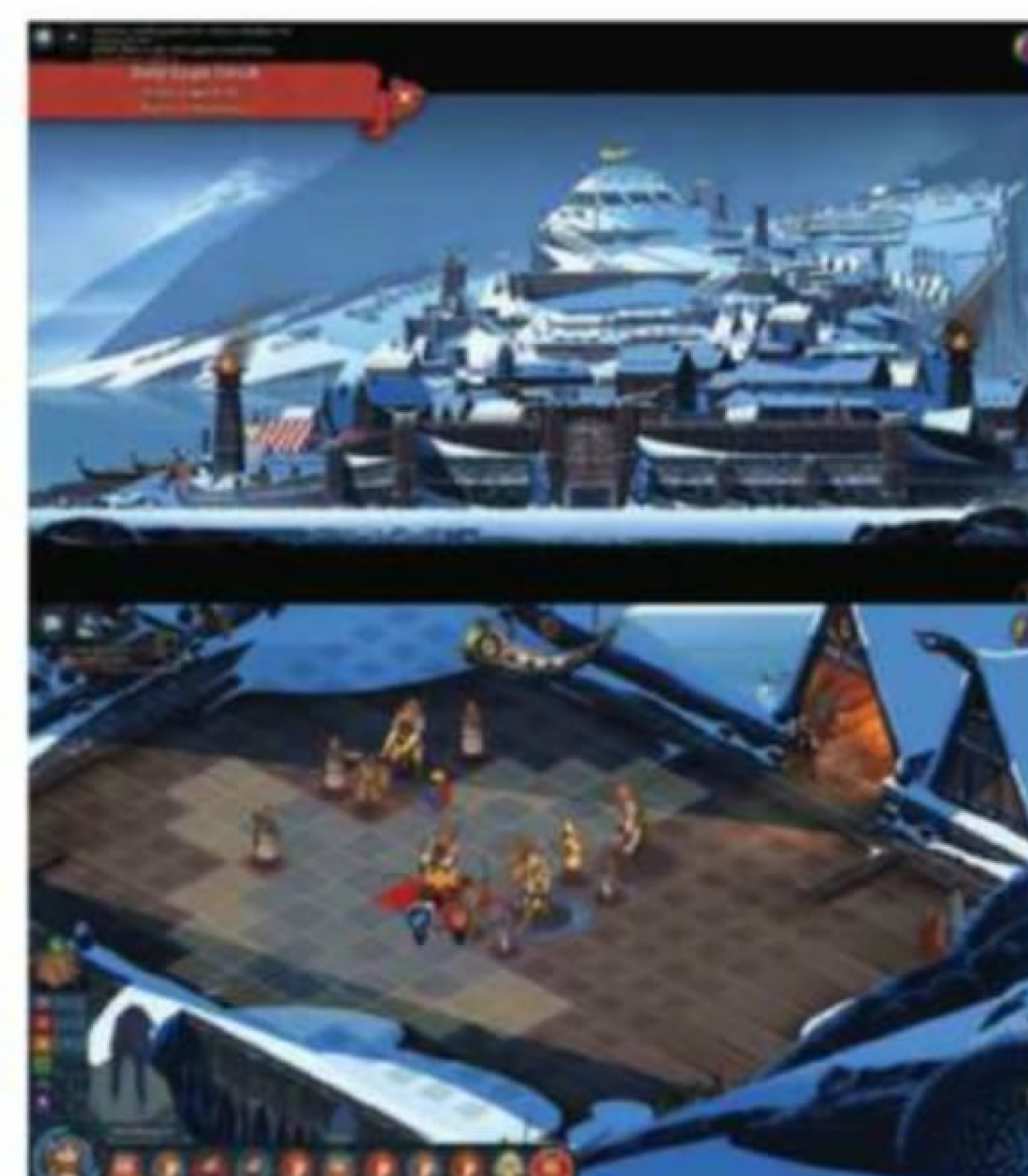
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SLEEPING BEAUTY: Much was said of *The Banner Saga*'s art style during its Kickstarter campaign, but seeing it in action is something else entirely. Everything about *Factions* looks extraordinary.

VERDICT 8/10
SOLID MECHANICS THAT'LL COST YOU NOTHING TO TRY





Above: Like all good grid-based strategy games, placement of your units from the very start of each match is of ultimate importance. Knowing where you can be attacked – and which units are likely to be targeted – is how you'll survive most encounters.

Welcome back to the golden age

RETRO COLLECTIONS

Revisit the games, films, shows and hardware that defined entertainment for a generation

BUY YOUR COPY TODAY

Print edition available at www.imagineshop.co.uk
Digital edition available at www.greatdigitalmags.com

Available on the following platforms




facebook.com/ImagineBookazines


twitter.com/Books_Imagine

Below: Touchscreen control is utilised sparingly (thankfully), but still comes into play when shooting the bow, where the rear touchpad can also be used to aim if you're one of those people that hates accuracy.





Above: 'The ultimate ninja action game,' reads the back of the box. Do you want to tell these guys that *Revengeance* exists or should we?

WELL, THAT'S SURE AS HELL NOT THE AGE RATING

Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2+

So you know how Team Ninja somehow managed to follow up one of the most violent games ever made with one that fundamentally got swords wrong? Yeah, that was a mistake. To make it up to you, the team has gone back to that original feat of ultra-violence and given it a bit of a spit and polish for a Vita release, only it seems as if there may have been way too much spitting and not a shammy in sight.

The first problem with this is that, brutal as this may be (both the game and the following analysis), *Ninja Gaiden 2* was never actually that good in the first place. For all the crimson showers and flying body parts, the sequel lacked the original's refinement, and even though Team Ninja might have played a clever trick in releasing a substantially worse game as a follow-up to make this one seem better, it's still not enough. Level design is all over the place, the game is littered with cheap enemies and attacks… it's just a format that has been done *way* better, which in a year when we've already been treated to the likes of *DmC*, *Revengeance* and *Ascension*, is only made all the more obvious. We're pretty sure nobody buys a handheld to play worse versions of the games that they love, but if your existence proves us wrong, know at least that you're in luck; despite a cacophony of bells and whistles, *Ninja Gaiden 2* is back and it's worse than ever.

It's the port itself that lets the whole package down, frankly. Although the game looks decent enough most of the time, the 'make it look pretty' filter sometimes just takes a day off to leave things looking jaggy, messy and generally nasty, while the frame rate veers from slick as shaved balls to accidental slow-mo, to the point where the images on this page might as well be gameplay footage. In a game that apparently demands precision, this is entirely unacceptable, and the further into it you get, the worse these problems grow – as if it weren't enough that enemies get more ruthless and punishing, you also have more and more technical issues to work through with each passing wave.

Extras like the almost-brilliant Ninja Race mode (where sections of the main game are bent and twisted to become score attack challenges) and the sorry-we-couldn't-do-proper-co-op Tag Missions add perceived – if not genuine – value to this update, but it's *still* not enough. The latter in particular is classic Team Ninja, offering the choice of Ryu Hayabusa or one of three outrageous pairs of breasts to run a score attack course too hung up on spectacle to actually work properly on a competitive level.

A well-meaning and feature-packed reissue it may be, but *Sigma 2+* could have improved on the basic model all it wanted; it wasn't very good in the first place, and it sure as hell isn't now.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Tecmo Koei
DEVELOPER: Team Ninja
PRICE: 39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: DYNASTY WARRIORS 7: EMPIRES



WORSE THAN: NINJA GAIDEN SIGMA

MISSING LINK

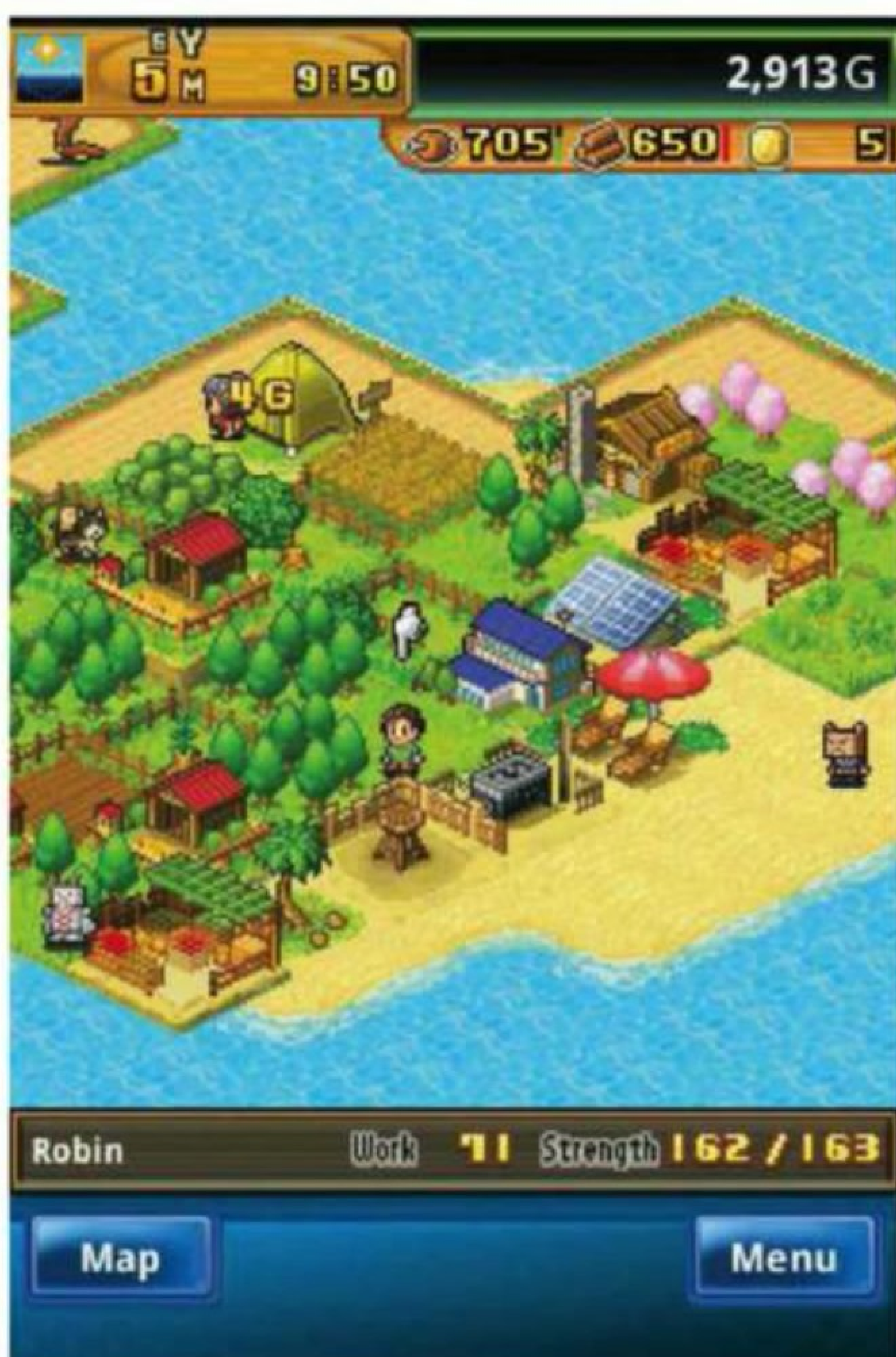
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TECHNICAL ISSUES: Even a straight port would have been a little brazen, so one that adds in issues that make the core game worse (despite the extra frills) just makes this wildly unnecessary.

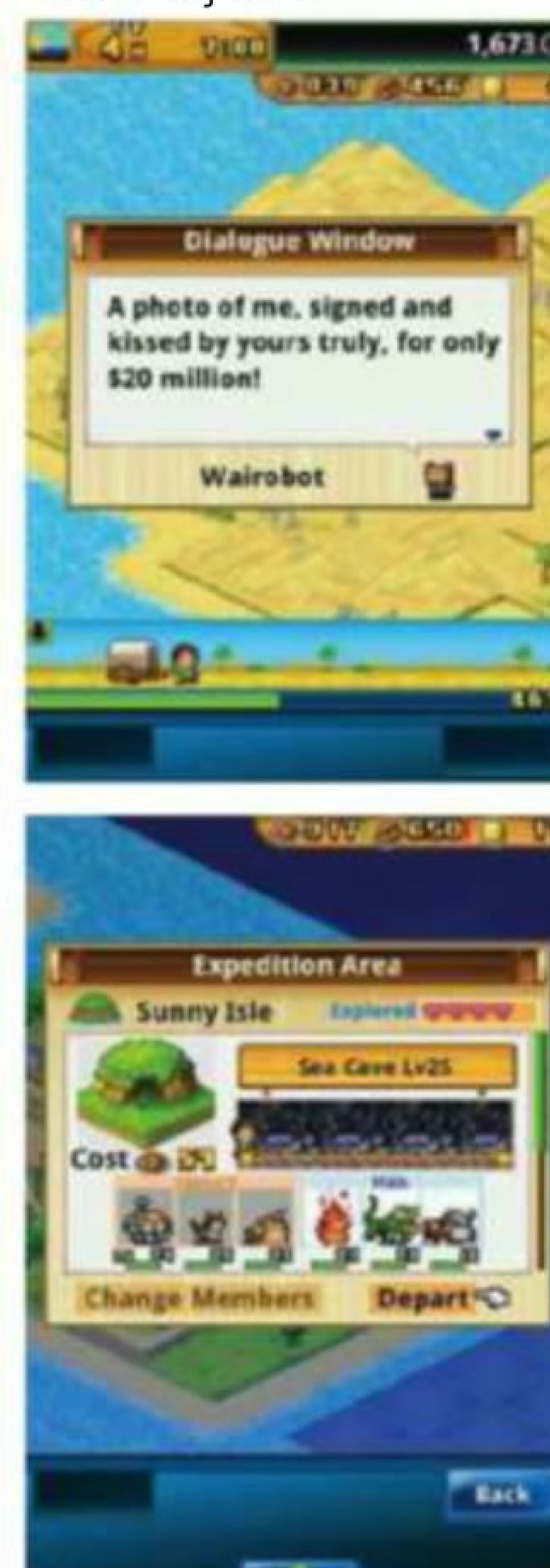


VERDICT 4/10

A PITIFUL PORT OF A MEDIOCRE GAME







Left: The different elemental types of creatures don't come into play as often as they should.

POCKET MONSTERS GET A NEW LEASE ON LIFE

Beastie Bay

Kairosoft has long been one of the few reasons to plump for an Android phone over iOS when it comes to games. The studio's titles are essentially an endless series of feedback loops, distilled versions of what made *Theme Hospital* and *Theme Park* magic, with a healthy dose of cutesy pixel art and unique, quirky humour. Its latest game, *Beastie Bay*, is Kairosoft riffing on *Pokémon*. The potential for addiction is quite terrifying.

And when we say riffing on *Pokémon*, we're being extremely generous; this is as close to a copy as possible without setting off alarms in Nintendo's legal department. You roam the land with a small party of critters of different elemental types (lightning, earth, etc) and battle other creatures. Weaken them enough and you can throw out bait to try and capture them, which makes that creature selectable for future exploration and battles.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Android
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Kairosoft
DEVELOPER: Kairosoft
PRICE: Free (To remove ads Android: £2.49 iOS: £2.99)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



This is welded to a traditional Kairosoft framework of exploration and upgrading. You begin by building homes for your creatures and soon transform your starting island into a haven for tourists. You build a raft to discover other islands, then clear them out of monsters and invest in them. In the meantime, your monkey scientist (of course) offers a wealth of research projects that lead to further items, buildings and upgrades. The challenge shifts as you play – your first job is getting a decent party of monsters together, then it's balancing resources and then levelling up your crew for the tougher areas.

Yet, surprisingly given the inspiration, combat is the weakest part of *Beastie Bay*. Kairosoft doesn't dabble in combat too often, as the studio usually has any competitive part of their games run automatically (as in *Dungeon Village*, *Pocket League Story* and *Grand Prix Story*). *Beastie Bay* shows why. You have direct control of your monsters and their moves, but this is a war of attrition rather than a battle of strategy and tactics. Creature types rarely come into play, and powering up normal attacks often puts them level with special moves, so for the sake of getting through things quickly, you end up spamming normal attacks to get through most battles.

What keeps you playing is what Kairosoft does best: the constant itch to uncover a new building or upgrade or creature. Where *Beastie Bay* suffers is that the focus on those compelling mechanics is diluted by the combat and, despite sticking so close to *Pokémon*, battling is not nearly engaging enough that you can call the mix successfully done.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

KAIROSOFT MEETS POKÉMON: The *Pokémon* inspiration is clear and a huge influence on the combat, but it's the traditional Kairosoft gameplay of tinkering and upgrading that shines brightest here.

Beastie Bay is still a wonderful game with a lot to offer, particularly for those who haven't fallen for the charms of Kairosoft's titles before. Yet for fans of Kairosoft (or *Pokémon*), there's an unusual whiff of disappointment that you wouldn't normally associate with games from the studio. An interesting experiment, then, even if it doesn't live up to its inspiration or potential.

VERDICT 7/10
WE WANT MORE KAIROSOFT AND LESS POKÉMON

LOCOROCO IN LIMBO?
A STRANGE RECIPE, BUT IT WORKS

Badland





Above: Sound effects are excellent, offering a tangible sense of connection to the surfaces you collide with. Meanwhile, the buzz of a circular saw often precedes an amusingly wet squelch as several clones meet their maker in the messiest possible way.

Like fellow Finnish firm Rovio, Frogmind evidently sees great value in exploring the laws of physics and their possibilities in games. *Badland* may share little in common with *Angry Birds*, but both feature moments of frustration, of thrilling chaos and of hysterical slapstick. It can't possibly expect to match the success of the avian phenomenon – this is a darker, much stranger proposition – but it's every bit as striking and memorable, and a good deal more than a casual time-waster, even if it requires no more than a single finger to play.

Part of the fun comes from the fact that you're in control of such a clumsy beast. Your round, fuzzy avatar has wings that can barely keep it airborne, and so most of the time it's bounced around the environment, ricocheting off surfaces with the plasticky slap of a flyaway beach football. It's comical at times and that helps counter the challenge, which – certainly in the later stages – can be fierce.

Because while its silhouetted art style owes a visual debt to PlayDead's *Limbo*, *Badland* also shares that game's playfully vicious streak, gleefully killing you off with traps you couldn't have seen coming, or forcing you to run gauntlets of piston-powered crushers, bladed cogs and explosive spiked sacs. Generously positioned restart points alleviate the frustration, though Frogmind cranks up the difficulty on occasion, with shorter stages that remove checkpoints entirely. Making it through in one piece is a breathless thrill, and once a level is completed you can revisit it to complete three (initially unseen) mission objectives.

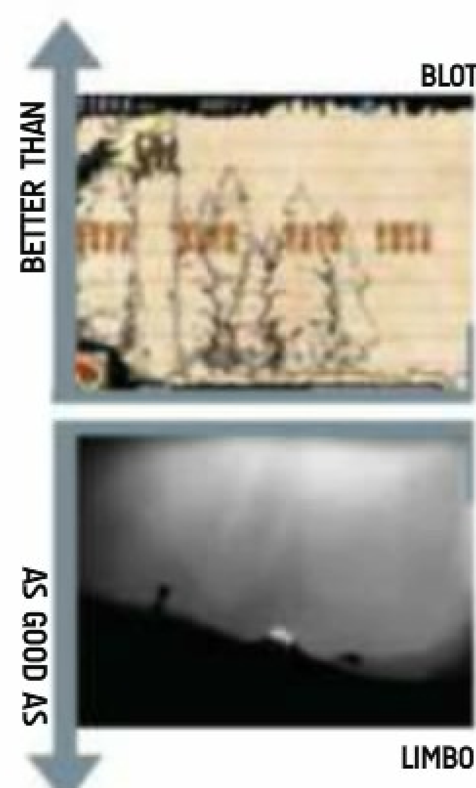
Levels are riddled with pressure plates, switches, booby traps, seesaws and giant boulders. Some stages are slower and more puzzle-led, while others are lightning-quick twitch tests. It regularly changes pace – and if it recycles most of its best ideas there's usually a fresh twist, like having to negotiate a stage with an unreasonably large avatar or slowing time down to a crawl to squeeze through tiny gaps. A variety of power-ups, meanwhile, can shrink your little fuzzball, send it speeding forward or even clone it, leading to several horrifying (or darkly comic, depending on your perspective) instances of having to sacrifice the many for the needs of the one – for example, sending a group on a suicide mission to hit a switch that opens up the way for a lone blob.

Its 40 levels should take quite some time to beat and when they're conquered, the stages play host to entertaining multiplayer races which give each competitor a quarter of the screen to tap as they attempt to get their clone further than the others. Like the single-player game, it eventually degenerates into chaos, but what thoroughly entertaining chaos it is; Frogmind's game proves a finger of fun is just enough to give everybody a treat.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Frogmind
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: TBC
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — BLOT



AS GOOD AS — LIMBO

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ACTION REPLAY: Finish a stage and you can watch or even record footage of your attempt. There's also a slider to adjust playback speed and an automatic slo-mo button to highlight the most dramatic moments.

VERDICT 8/10
A BEAUTIFUL, INVENTIVE AUTO-SCROLLER

Below: Stages take you from dawn to night, the later stages of each chapter acting as a visual segue into the next. Backgrounds are busier than in *Limbo*, but the contrast is stark enough that you're never likely to lose your fuzzy avatar.





EVERY GAME. EVERY FORMAT. ONE CHOICE

www.NOWGAMER.com



NOWGamer.com

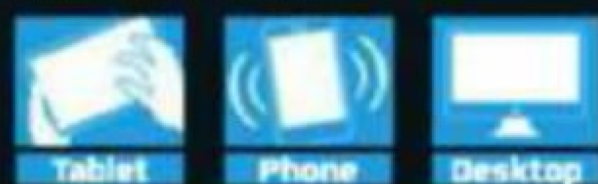
FIRST WITH THE BIGGEST GAMES

GTA V · BioShock Infinite · Watch Dogs · Metal Gear 5



VISIT NOWGAMER.COM TODAY

Available on:



 facebook.com/NowGamer

 twitter.com/NowGamer_Feed

UP, UP, DOWN, DOWN, (PIKA) CHU-CHU-CHU

HarmoKnight

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Game Freak
PRICE: TBC
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: BIT.TRIP RUNNER



WORSE THAN: SPACE CHANNEL 5

As it holds the keys to one of Nintendo's most lucrative franchises, it's hardly surprising that Game Freak seldom develops a game that doesn't have Pokémon somewhere in the title. But on the few occasions where it empties its pockets of monsters and does something different, we are rarely disappointed. Japan-only Mega Drive game *Pulseman* came before the Pokémon boom but still holds up today, for instance, while GBA oddity *Drill Dozer* proved to be one of the more inventive and technically impressive titles on the handheld. And now, some 597 *Pokémon* games later, the studio finally gets another chance to show that it is capable of more than just raising and battling hundreds of critters – with this cutesy musical platformer, Game Freak doesn't miss a beat.

Perhaps even more than Pokémon, *HarmoKnight* appears to be aimed squarely at the younger end of the 3DS user base. Saccharin-drenched characters with nauseating pun names unite to save the world from the Noizoids. It's the stuff of early morning cartoons at best, though the focus isn't really on characters or narrative, rather the tried and tested gameplay mechanic of slapping buttons in time with music.

Levels play out almost entirely like *Bit.Trip Runner*, so protagonist Tempo runs along automatically while you tap one of two buttons to fend off foes and dodge obstacles. It starts off dangerously simple, but slowly grows deeper and more gruelling, eventually winding up with a pretty solid score attack backbone once all the mechanics are in place. Background objects can often be hit for bonus points and charged attacks earn double, while multiple routes will see you replaying stages to experiment and discover which are the most lucrative. There's even the odd change of character (each having their own abilities and gimmicks) to mix things up a little, though it would have been good to see a little more made of these.

For its boss battles and key events, *HarmoKnight* simplifies things further still and becomes *Space Channel 5*'s younger sibling. It's a call-and-response test of memory and rhythm, and although these levels don't have anything like the same degree of score attack depth as the platform stages, they're more about the spectacle than anything else. You don't strictly have to memorise the longer strings of commands, either; directional presses will always correspond with a change in the path or something to dodge, while the two regular actions (that's 'hit' and 'jump', action fans) are used logically, even if the prompts do come a little thick and fast to exclusively sight read.

The credits can be reached in just a few hours, but with high scores to chase, unlockable Pokémon music stages to ace and tougher 'Fast' variants of every stage to brave (as well as a set of brutal post-credits levels), rhythm-action fans will find they always have something to go back to. Look past the simplistic opening and child-friendly presentation and you'll find a rhythm-action game of surprising depth and quality – it's just a shame those factors will inevitably prevent many demo-samplers from hearing *HarmoKnight* out.

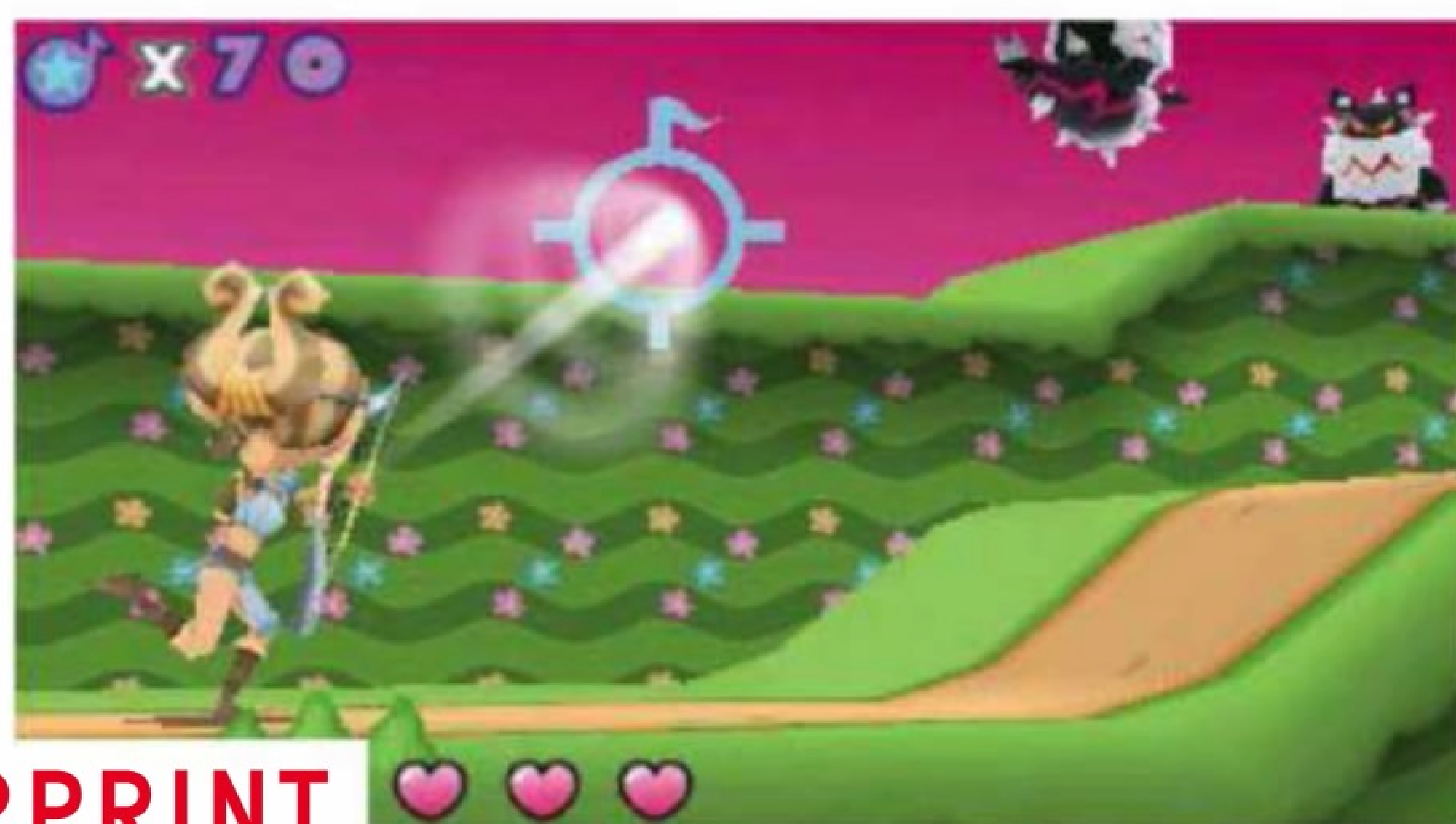
FINGERPRINT

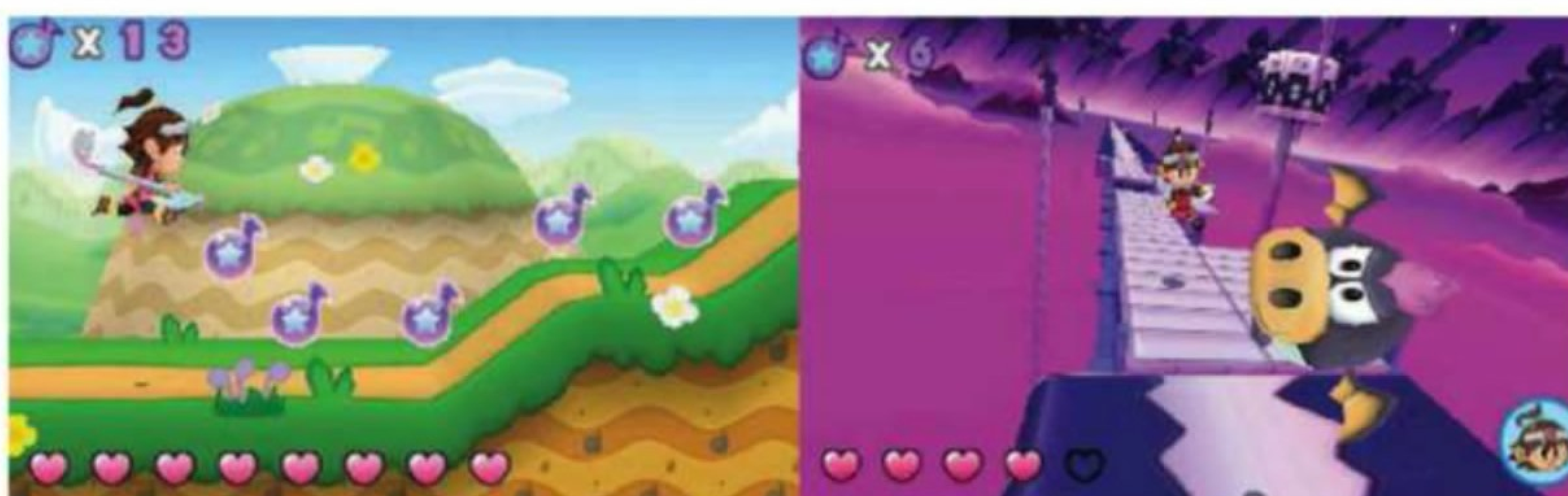
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DOUBLE SLAP: *HarmoKnight*'s gameplay is split in two categories; regular rhythm-platforming stages make up most of the game, broken up by on-rails tempo-tapping for event sequences and boss battles.



Above: The Pokémon stages will be the highlight for many players, though it's quite surprising that they're among *HarmoKnight*'s most punishing tasks. Gotta love those monster-filled backdrops, though…





Above: The story (or what passes for one, at least) is told through animated comic-style cut-scenes, which look lovely in 3D. We're still not entirely sold on the character design in general, though.

VERDICT 8/10
WHAT? GAME FREAK IS EVOLVING!

CAPCOM'S STILL USING THAT OLD MORRIGAN SPRITE, EH?

Darkstalkers Resurrection

Below: After playing a little Morrigan in *MVC3*, it's strange to revisit her before she could duplicate herself and trap unsuspecting foes in horrible death loops.



Pretty much every time we've spoken with Capcom's Yoshinori Ono, he's mentioned how much he'd like to see a new *Darkstalkers* game on consoles. And while we're pretty sure his dream is to see Felicia, Demitri and the rest of the cast given a 3D overhaul in the vein of *Street Fighter IV*, this HD twin pack of the series' two best games will have to do for the time being. As with *Third Stike*'s rerelease, it's a spruced-up arcade port in a fancy new frame and, although there might not be as much to it as many modern fighters, we're glad that its coffin lid has creaked open all the same.

Even though the *Versus* games have taken crazy rosters to the extreme, *Darkstalkers*' misfit monster mob still holds up brilliantly, and it's the characters that haven't been given a chance to break free of the franchise that pique interest the most. Possessed samurai Bishamon, deceptively speedy fuzzball Sasquatch, zombie rock legend Lord Raptor and his shape-shifting silliness… in terms of both design and play-styles, it really is a brilliant line-up. Still, those that have met the likes of Morrigan and Felicia in crossover fighters might find that they feel somewhat different on their home turf.

In the search for greater accessibility, many recent crossovers have relaxed combo timings and opened the door to 100-hit combos for everyone. But just as going back to *Third Strike* after playing *SFIV* highlights how much we've come to expect games to make up for our shortcomings in execution, these two classic fighters only offer up the good stuff to those with perfect reactions and timing, rather than those who mash buttons and occasionally do 'that move where the guy sets his hand on fire and jumps in the air' by mistake.

And while Capcom's generosity in offering up two games is laudable, you're unlikely to ever really need both – the third is the better game, though those that grew up with the second will likely spend most time there for fear of the changes the sequel brought with it (unique character-specific buff supers and a modified life system, to name but a few). Both offer pretty much the same features here, with the expected solo and multiplayer options backed up by a decent training mode and, rather than *SFIV*'s awesome Trials, a mode that does a great job of both walking *and* talking you through each character's play-style, combo examples and unique abilities.

Ignore the usual array of nasty visual filters and gimmick screen frames; put in a few hours and you'll soon find there's a lot still to like about *Darkstalkers*. Let's just hope the two separate games don't split the community too much. We'd love to see this litmus test for a new game in the franchise do well. So go on, pick it up. Do it for Ono.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: Iron Galaxy
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DOUBLE TROUBLE: The package includes the second and third *Darkstalkers* games, though outside of nostalgia there's little reason to leave *Darkstalkers 3* – it's clearly the better of the two fighters.

VERDICT 7/10
BACK FROM THE DEAD





Right: Don't worry – those nasty visual filters can be switched off. The challenge sidebars can be removed as well, if you don't mind stretching the game to fit a non-native widescreen display.

HIGHWAY TO TELL

Kentucky Route Zero: Act I

DETAILS

FORMAT: Mac
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Cardboard Computer
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Act I: $7, all five Acts: $25
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — FLOWER, SUN AND RAIN



WORSE THAN — THE WALKING DEAD

As an episodic, narrative-driven adventure, *Kentucky Route Zero* was always bound to attract comparisons to *The Walking Dead*, yet the two games are so different in their approach that any juxtaposition of the two is meaningless. There's a raw power to the storytelling in Telltale's game that's entirely absent here; this is a purposely vague and thoughtfully paced blend of interactive drama that's happy to reach its destination in its own sweet time. It's a low-key, thoughtful and darkly compelling tale, and its enigmatic slice of Midwest Americana represents a terrific piece of world building.

It finds visual poetry in an otherwise mundane setting, with a characterful aesthetic that makes expert use of lighting, animation and environmental detail to bring its crisp polygonal world to life. As truck driver Conway, you're asked to find the titular, possibly mythical highway – your conversations with the handful of locals adding texture to a hazy, meandering plot that can, at times, seem a little too calculatedly strange. Its second half, however, finds a surer footing with the introduction of another lost soul apparently waiting to be found, the dialogue becoming more warm and human as the two explore together with Conway's faithful hound.

It's far from a traditional point-and-click – puzzles are infrequent and simple, a means to a narrative end rather than environmental roadblocks to chew over – but that merely allows its rich atmosphere to permeate. Its interactions may seem incidental, but they flesh out the world, allowing you to personalise the experience. In other words, the lines may already be drawn, but colouring between them proves surprisingly engaging. Roll on Act II.

VERDICT 8/10
A VERY PROMISING START

Below: The interface is smart and unobtrusive: icons denoting available interactions appear when you approach a person or important object, and if you click to walk anywhere you'll see an oddly charming animation of a tiny horseshoe whirling round a pixel-thin post.



BRING YOUR CAR KEYS – AND DON'T FORGET YOUR WALLET

Real Racing 3

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: Australia
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER: Firemonkeys
PRICE: Freemium
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-22
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN — BURNOUT LEGENDS DS



WORSE THAN — FORZA HORIZON

Years into the future, videogame historians will look upon the critical and commercial reception afforded to the *Real Racing* series with bafflement. The secret of its success seems to be little more than novelty; this is a franchise that comes close to the promise of 'console quality' on the go, but that description applies only to its looks – and even then it's still lagging some way behind the *Forza*s and *Gran Turismo*s of this world. Behind its semi-attractive exterior, it's nothing more than a serviceable sim with a control scheme that's perfectly adequate on its platform of choice, but feels like a compromise when compared to any of its console counterparts. It's a pretty standard racing game: fine in isolation, but utterly bland and with few ideas of its own.

The most notable feature of its latest iteration is an egregious payment structure that stifles it further. Repairs to your car are extortionate, biting huge chunks out of your prize money, and while that may encourage careful driving, you'll have to give AI opponents a very wide berth to avoid shunts and bumps. Upgrades are expensive, forcing you into a laborious grind if you don't want to pay real money. General wear and tear, meanwhile, requires you to shell out to avoid a lengthy wait for repairs. It's akin to being kept in detention by a strict teacher who's responsive to bribery: you can only play when he says, unless you're ready to spend. And why would you be? There are many better App Store distractions than this, and few so brazen about taking your cash.



Above: Better give your racing rivals a wide berth to avoid expensive shunts and bumps.



Above: The racers you'll face are human opponents whose driving has been recorded. 'Time-Shifted Multiplayer' it's called and while it's a neat idea, it just means you're even more likely to be cut up on corners, incurring damage and thus expensive repair bills.

VERDICT 8/10
DON'T PAY THE DRIVER

WHY I ♥...

Super Metroid

TED PRICE, INSOMNIAC GAMES

The game that inspired me the most was Super Metroid*. That's because its use of weapons and gadgets was second to none at the time. It was the perfect application of weapons balancing [and] challenge unlocking, and it threw surprises at the player over and over again. It did the best job at the time of making players feel smart and that for me… felt gratifying. You can see its influence in a lot of [Insomiac's] games, especially* Ratchet & Clank.

"It did the best job at the time of making players feel smart and that, for me… felt gratifying"

TED PRICE, INSOMNIAC GAMES



FOR PEOPLE WHO ♥ RETRO GAMES
www.retrogamer.net

retro GAMER

ON SALE NOW

Available from all good newsagents and supermarkets

Wriggler · Mark Turmell · Playstation 2 · Bizzare Creations · Punch-Out!!

CLASSIC GAMES



BIG INTERVIEWS



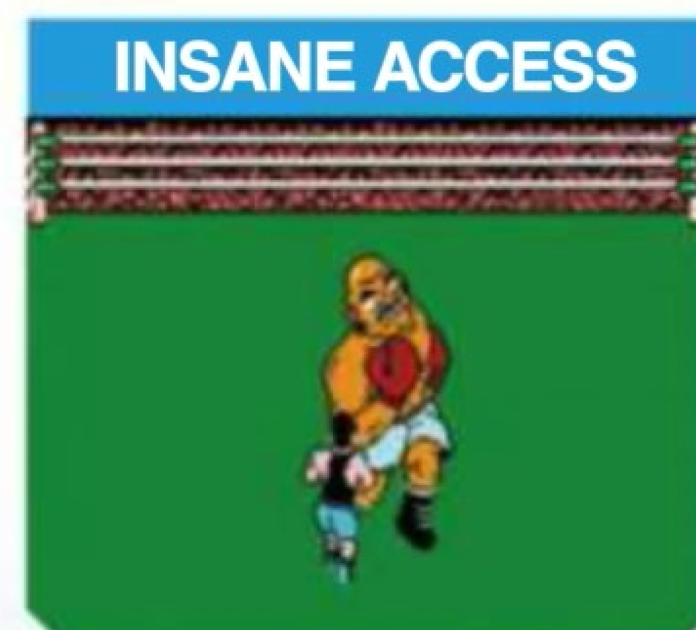
COOL HARDWARE



COMPANY PROFILES



INSANE ACCESS



BUY YOUR ISSUE TODAY

Print edition available at www.imagineshop.co.uk
Digital edition available at www.greatdigitalmags.com

Available on the following platforms

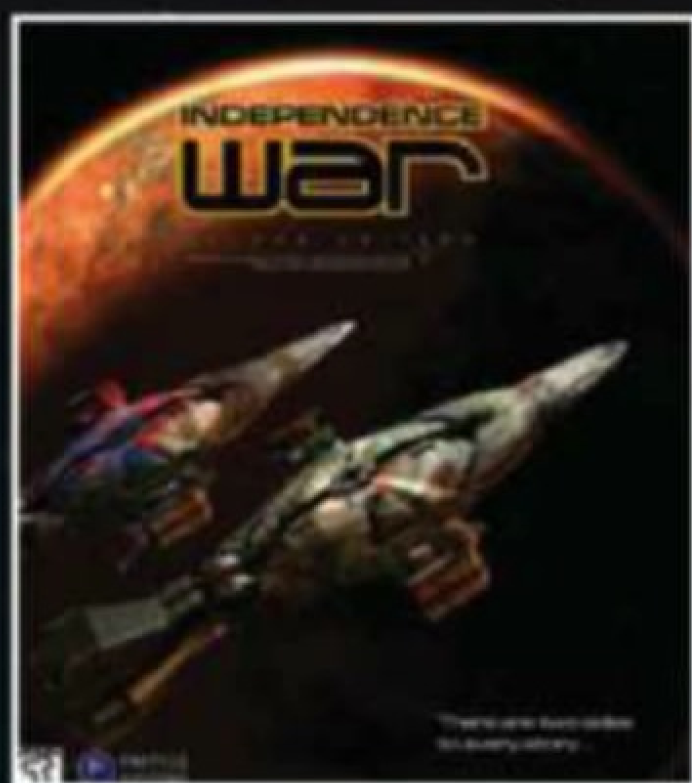


 facebook.com/RetroGamerUK  twitter.com/RetroGamer_Mag

RETRO

>"WHAT IS A MA... E OF SECRETS" NO.134 APRIL 2013

DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro on our dedicated forum **www.gamestm.co.uk/forum**



Released: 1997 (original in Europe), 1998 (USA), 1999 (Deluxe Edition with Defiance expansion), 2001 (Edge Of Chaos)

Format: PC
Publisher: Infogrames
Developer: Particle Systems

KEY STAFF:
Michael Powell
Main Programmer (original game) and Producer (Edge Of Chaos)
Glyn Williams
Main Designer & Art Director
Stephen Robertson
Designer (Defiance expansion & Edge Of Chaos)

BEHIND THE SCENES

THE I-WAR SERIES

We chat to some of Particle Systems' key players about the I-War series' creation, its development, and what the future holds for one of most critically acclaimed space simulators of all time

SPACE SIMULATION IS back in the spotlight, with Kickstarter funding eagerly anticipated new games. British company Particle Systems provided a unique take on the genre with *I-War*. **games™** manoeuvres into orbit around the key people behind the series.

Michael Powell and Glyn Williams met at school. "After university, both of us were writing our own games. Particle Systems, based in Sheffield, was the outcome of deciding to work together," says Williams. "At the outset we had only really thought of the first title, which started out as Big Ships. We both liked the idea of a reality TV show, where contestants would sit in a motion simulator and become the bridge crew of a big ship; that wasn't possible, but a space simulator title with episodic missions was."

"Work started in 1994," adds Powell. "The idea came really from looking at what we had done before with my *SubWar 2050* and Glyn's *Warhead*, and wanting to take a massive leap forward." The player controlled a Dreadnaught-class Corvette in the Commonwealth Navy, fighting Earth colonists known as Indies. "We genuinely wanted to give the player a feeling of power and potency by being in command of a versatile, multi-crewed starship," says Powell. "We were also inspired by sci-fi authors like Iain Banks, Larry Niven and even EE 'Doc' Smith. The Indie ship names were inspired by the ironic names used in Iain Banks' culture series, such as 'No More Mr Nice Guy'."

"A bigger ship needs a bridge crew," Williams points out. "One crewmember would be responsible for piloting, another would deploy the weapons and another might manage the engines. Having a screen interface for each of these bridge stations was how we chose to present this idea. I always loved *Star Trek*, but wanted to see the Warship Enterprise. This influenced the game structure. I liked the idea of writing it as a TV season. Each mission was like an episode, with a setup, guest characters, a twist and hopefully a satisfying end."

Another key element that made the game stand out was the Newtonian physics. "Newtonian physics just seemed like the right starting point for a simulation. But, of course, we had to take some liberties to make it work in a game context," acknowledges Williams. "It was difficult making the ship easy enough to fly. We put loads of thought into the HUD to give players a feel for when the ship was moving in one direction but facing another. To make it easier we put in AI logic that corrected the ship's 'drift', but we always loved the 'free flight' mode and the tactics it offered," says Powell.

SIX PEOPLE DID EVERYTHING… WE HAD TO LEARN HOW TO DO IT AS WE WENT ALONG

PARTICLE SYSTEMS WAS working with Philips Media as publisher, who instigated the first name change (see By Any Other Name). At Philips was assistant producer Stephen Robertson; "One of the tasks I had at Philips was to provide gameplay feedback and I did a playthrough of a pre-release version, which the team found useful. When Philips pulled out of the games market I lost my job, but was extremely fortunate that Mike Powell and Glyn Williams thought I would be a good addition to the





A 20-minute CGI movie was one of *I-War*'s highlights.









Particle Systems took inspiration from many sci-fi shows, including *Star Trek*.





BY ANY OTHER NAME

"NAMES FOR games has always been a tricky business, as when you think of a good one it's nearly always been taken already," says Michael Powell. Working title Big Ships became Dreadnaught, but Phillips felt this would not work in some countries. Next choice Infinity War clashed with a Marvel Comics miniseries, so it was shortened to I-War. The Atari Jaguar game *I-War* forced another change – after the initial European release – to *Independence War*, with the tagline 'The Space Flight Simulator'.

The *Defiance* expansion created the *Independence War Deluxe Edition*, and patching *I-War* to run on newer graphics cards changed the logo to Independence War. Existing American *I-War* owners could send in a coupon for a partial refund. The sequel was *Independence War 2: Edge Of Chaos* in the USA and *Edge Of Chaos: Independence War 2* internationally. The German budget re-release was confusingly known as *Galaxy Commander: Edge Of Chaos*.

WHAT THEY SAID...

Independence War not only provides the most detailed flight and systems modelling yet seen in a space sim, it also provides a complex, rewarding plot and a fully fleshed-out gaming world. 9.1/10

Gamespot UK,
October 1998

team and offered me a job as a designer, which was my first full-time designer role." Infogrames became the publisher and Powell remembers, "Our relationship with Infogrames at the time was always good, largely thanks to our great producers such as Ash Colclough and David Hawkins, who were strong advocates of the game with senior management."

Many contemporary games had fancy FMV intros, but Particle created a 20-minute CGI movie. "It was certainly challenging producing such a long rendered movie, but we felt it was essential to set the scene and tell the backstory leading up to the game," says Powell. "Looking back, we should have hired more people, but that wasn't an option at the time. The biggest challenge back then was facial expressions and lip-synch, so Glyn carefully chose stylish camera angles which avoided that as much as possible!" Williams goes on to explain the rationale behind choosing CGI: "We had a tiny team and didn't have the resources for a blue-screen shoot with sets and props. With an all-rendered intro we didn't have the same constraints. The upside was that we built high-poly models for all the main ships and stations. We used these to produce great-looking textures for the real-time models. At the time this was new, but baking real-time assets from high-poly source models has since become a standard workflow. As frustrated film-makers we probably set the bar a bit too high. We ended up making a 20-minute CGI movie plus a ton of cut-scene shots, and 40 pre-rendered wireframe briefing videos. We didn't know that this volume of video production was impossible. Had someone told us that feature-length CGI films cost tens of millions to make, we might have dialled down the ambition level a bit."

There was a major hurdle in changing graphics card technology. The game initially only supported 3DFX cards through Glide, with the Deluxe version updated to run on Voodoo 2 cards (with new higher-definition assets). Robertson says, "I'd have liked us to convert the engine to DirectX, so it could have run better on non-3DFX hardware, but we didn't have the resources for that. Fortunately, Glide emulators now allow you to run the 3DFX version on modern graphics cards, and even allow extra enhancements such as anti-aliasing."

Robertson headed up work on *Defiance*, an expansion featuring 18 new missions from the Indie side of the conflict. "When designing game content for a story-based game there are several ways you can do it," says Robertson. "One way is to design your gameplay ideas and fit the story around that; another is to come up with a compelling story and design your gameplay around the story elements. Defiance was a combination of both those types. Some missions were designed because we liked the gameplay ideas – stealing a cruiser from the Commonwealth Navy dockyard, for example. We also wanted the player to see some events in the original game from the opposing point of view.

"We were all inspired by various sci-fi shows, and I enjoyed playing other space sims such as *Tie Fighter* and *Freespace*, though I don't think any of those games directly influenced my designs. Fundamentally, *I-War* was and still is markedly different from most space simulation games, being more focused on the simulation side and flying a small capital ship rather than a fighter." Before the release, Robertson faced a challenge. "I had to play the final mission to completion in front of our publisher's producer because the testers said it was impossible to complete. I'm glad to say I did it without any problems." The expansion took six



Attacking an enemy fleet with a mining laser is a good strategy.

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION

Elite > Independence War > 0x10c



Elite took people on a trip into a massive universe, combining scripted missions and player freedom to launch the space simulation genre.



Elite and *Star Citizen* fans are excited by Mojang's *0x10c*, with its large programmable ships exploring a multiplayer universe.



MODS & ROCKETS

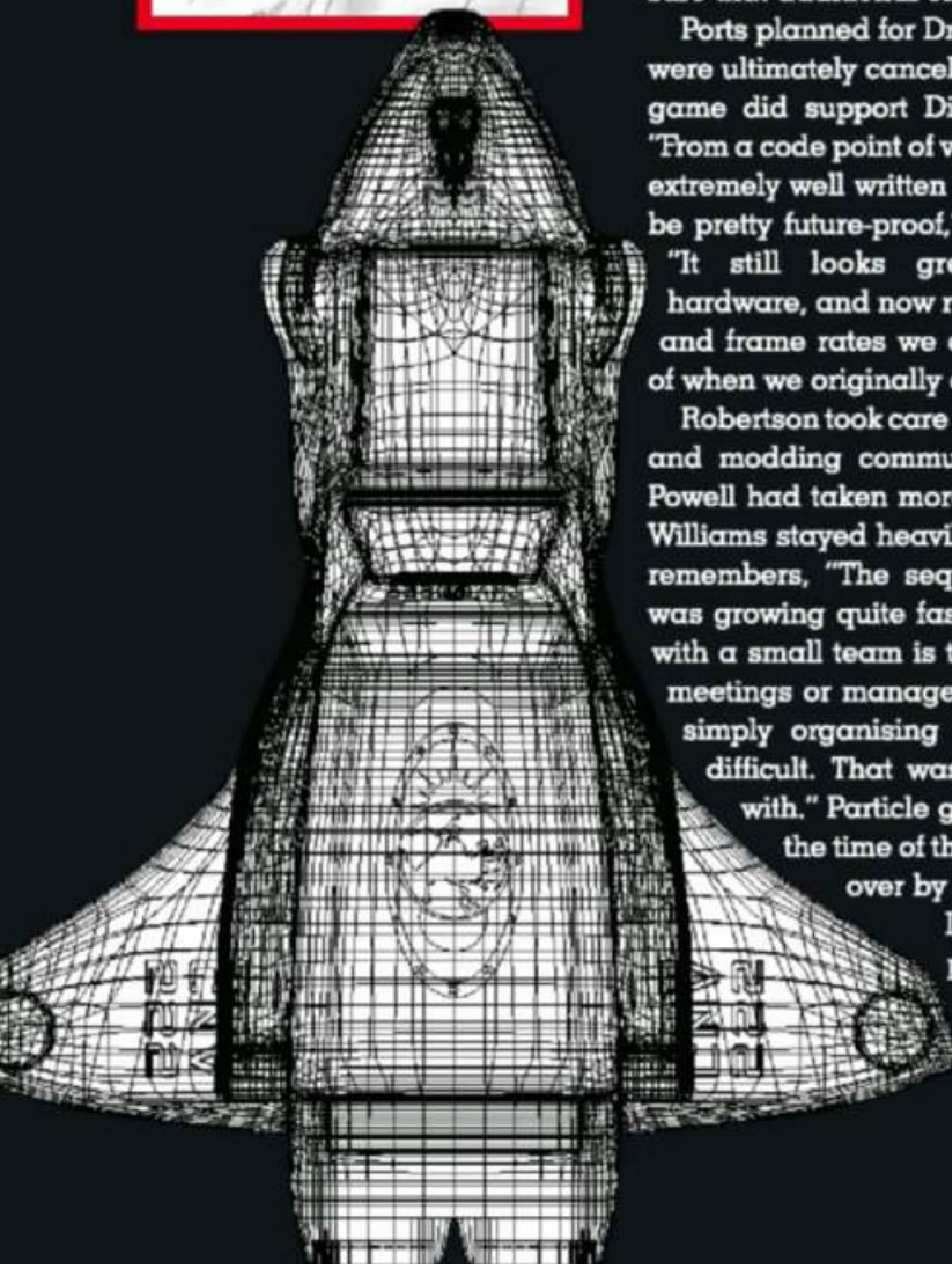
THE ONLINE forum and modding helped created a large fanbase. Stephen Robertson says, "We were fortunate in that our community was the most polite, helpful and knowledgeable community I've had the pleasure to be involved with. We got some useful feedback on bugs and new feature requests. We ran an *I-War 2* multiplayer beta with the community as participants, and later on I asked some forum members to beta test some mods I had written.

"I also put together the modding SDK and documentation which led to dozens of user mods being created. I wrote some mods which added functionality to the game and which were also used as tutorials on how to script mods in general, and one that allowed more complex changes by getting multiple mods to work together. I was amazed at the scope of some of the mods. There was a *Babylon 5* total conversion for *I-War* called Buda 5, which was very well written and even had voice acting. On *I-War 2* there was a total conversion called Torn Stars which was an incredibly ambitious mod that added so much more onto the base game."

months and was boxed with the original as the *Independence War Deluxe Edition*.

Sequel *Edge Of Chaos* was set 100 years after the first game. The focus was Cal Johnston, a pirate in the Badlands Cluster far away from Earth, fighting against the Marauders. Online multiplayer was added, but the dedicated servers have been switched off. Williams says, "A decision was taken to shift the game structure to an open sandbox-like world, rather than the on-rails structure of the original. That single decision introduced a ton of complexity and additional work. In hindsight, I'm not sure that additional effort paid off."


MICHAEL POWELL
Programmer



Ports planned for Dreamcast and N64 were ultimately cancelled. However, this game did support DirectX technology. "From a code point of view the game was extremely well written and turned out to be pretty future-proof," says Robertson. "It still looks great on modern hardware, and now runs at resolutions and frame rates we could only dream of when we originally developed it."

Robertson took care of the game's online presence and modding community (see Mods & Rockets). Powell had taken more of a management role, but Williams stayed heavily involved as a designer. He remembers, "The sequel started as the company was growing quite fast. The nicest part of working with a small team is that there is far less need for meetings or management. As the company grew, simply organising things became much more difficult. That was the toughest thing to deal with." Particle grew from seven to 27 staff by the time of the sequel, and was then taken over by Argonaut.

Looking back, they're all proud of the series. "We built a very ambitious game with a small team of really talented individuals. Just six people did everything: the coding, all the CGI, the writing, the graphic design and the sound. And we had to learn how to do all that stuff as we went along. Fortunately, no one told us that it was not possible," says Williams. Williams left Particle Systems after the takeover and is working on a new mobile project.

But there was also another development opportunity. "We pitched an online MMO open universe version of *I-War*, but Infogrames couldn't see it being a good idea," says Powell. "Subsequently, the incredibly successful *Eve* has dominated that market and made a ton of money in the process." Powell now runs Xenon Studios, providing animation for games, advertising and TV companies. Robertson, still working in the industry, loved his work on the series. "It was a shame when Infogrames/Atari closed the [online forum] down. The community dispersed and much of the extensive content and knowledge posted on the board was lost. I'd loved to have gone back over the original *I-War* and added save points, but we didn't have the time and budget to do that. I played through some of the original *I-War* campaign recently. I'd forgotten how hard the missions were!"

With the originals available on Good Old Games, could the series make a comeback? Powell offers his view: "The Kickstarter phenomenon is a great way of funding 'niche' products, but I do hope that everyone who has promised games delivers in reasonable time or there could be a massive backlash. No *I-War* product is yet planned, but is definitely possible if we think the interest is there and is significant enough to fund development." Williams admits, "I'm going to be watching with interest what happens with the Kickstarter projects. I think it is tough to position a space game these days. To satisfy the hardcore fans it needs to be quite geeky and hardcore, but to find a sizeable audience it has to be playable and accessible. If I became involved in a new project, I'd like to try to solve that problem."



BEST BOSS

ILLUSION OF TIME SNES [Quintet] 1995

■ BOSSES COME in various shapes and sizes, but rarely will you find yourself going head-to-head with an actual planet. While dwarfed by its astronomical stature, Chaos Comet isn't the biggest threat Will (in his Shadow form) must contend with towards the end of *Illusion Of Time*. Dark Gaia is the very antithesis of the mother spirit that has assisted players up until that point, aiming to transform everything that exists into horrific demons. Not cool. Sprouting from the surface of the planet, large tomes could be written on how to successfully finish Dark Gaia off, as the omnipotent evil has a particularly nasty case of laser breath. Persevere through and bask in the gratification that you've just taken down one of the titans of gaming.

CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports, under the spotlight



SUPER KICK OFF





ORIGINAL RELEASE FORMAT: **Various** YEAR: **1989** PUBLISHER: **Anco** DEVELOPER: **In-house**

SYSTEM FAILURE BOARD: **Game Boy** YEAR: **1991** PUBLISHER: **Imagineer /US Gold** DEVELOPER: **Enigma Variations**

LONG BEFORE *FIFA* and *PES*'s football rivalry, *Sensible Soccer* and *Kick Off* were vying for gamers' hard-earned cash with similar takes on the sport. These days, bird's-eye view football feels a thing that will never escape videogame's past, but at one time it was seen as one of the best perspectives to adapt the sport, giving players a clear view of the pitch and their team to help them better aim their passes and shots.

The original *Kick Off* was birthed on home computers and *Super Kick Off* marked the series' first proper arrival to home consoles. Released for various formats, it's the Game Boy version that you should avoid like a home team local on an away game. Aside from the foreseeable issues that stem from the Game Boy's small screen – tiny controls and monochrome visuals not really being a great fit for a game of football – it's the amusing player-to-pitch ratio that blows the first whistle that all might not be quite right about this handheld iteration.

The players look tiny in relation to the pitch, and because they're so small and lack any detail (they look like they're dressed in onesies) or colour, they are often confused with the ball once the game gets going. It also easy to mistake your players for the opposing team's keeper, and even easier to get the ball muddled with penalty spots and the shadow it casts on the pitch – very handy when trying to take a shot or defend from an attacker.



Player AI is also dubious; matches feel like one versus 11 computer players, fouls always seem to strangely occur off-screen and your goalkeeper just seems to dive around his goalmouth as if rehearsing for a part in *Max Payne* whenever the ball comes anywhere near him.

The audio is about as delightful to the ears as an electric vuvuzela and the controls aren't great either. The ball doesn't stick to players' feet, which would be fine if their movement didn't feel so twitchy. In fact, passing, tackling and shooting feels about as straightforward as trying to herd three angry cobras into a matchbox full of drawing pins. Overall then, this portable version of *Kick Off* is a complete footballing gaffe, one that should be shown a red card and kicked off the nearest tall cliff.

THE BREAKDOWN

1 Player AI is pretty bad. Most of the time when you do get the ball you'll just fall back on the strategy of running it straight up the middle of the pitch. What's also weird is that fouls often get committed off-screen, something that makes the gameplay even more frustrating.

2 Your team is useless and the goalkeeper might as well not be there for all the good he is. A lot of the time he'll seem to dive *away* from the ball. Also amusing is the fact that their attire clashes with the opposing team, which is really helpful during goalmouth scrambles.

3 During matches you often play Spot The Ball, which is a great game for newspapers – not so much for virtual football games with tiny sprites. Play along at home and try to guess which small circle is the ball, the ball's shadow and the penalty spot.



■ The Mega Drive version (seen above) is easily home to the best-looking version of *Super Kick Off*.



WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: **Game Gear** Year: **1991**
Publisher: **Sega** Developer: **Tiertex Design Studios**

■ If life depended on playing a portable version of *Kick Off* then the Game Gear version was the much better alternative. It's not perfect, but the gameplay feels far less fidgety than the Game Boy version, and being in colour makes all the difference, too.

GAME CHANGERS

Super Mario 64

Released: 1996
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo
System: N64



gamesTM examines the industry's most important videogames, looking at their influence and what made them so great. This month we kick things off with Super Mario 64, the most important 3D platformer of all time

EARLY GAMES OFTEN struggled when they made the jump from 2D to 3D. Franchises that had been so fun to play in 2D suddenly lost part of their charm. When Mario made his debut on the N64, however, he suffered from no such problems. In fact, it's safe to say that his exciting arrival shaped the genre for years to come, while proving that classic franchises could make the supposedly difficult transition to 3D.

And Nintendo certainly knew what it was doing when it unleashed Mario in his new 64-bit playground, giving him a slew of new abilities that allowed him to interact with the game world in new and exciting ways. Creator Shigeru Miyamoto had built *Super Mario 64* specifically around the N64's controller, and the result offered a natural play experience that effortlessly highlighted Mario's many new abilities. The revitalised plumber could scramble up trees and somersault off them, crouch to get into small nooks and crannies, shimmy along narrow passageways, gingerly tip-toe past sleeping enemies, punch foes

THE BEST TRANSITION FROM 2D TO 3D IN RECENT GAMING MEMORY



BEFORE SUPER MARIO 64

I, Robot

Released: 1983



■ Although not strictly a platformer, this was the first arcade game to use filled 3D polygons to create an imaginative game world. Dave Theurer's creation was a financial flop, but has since gone on to receive cult status.

3D Ant Attack

Released: **1983**



■ This isometric adventure from Sandy White had you searching the ruined city of Antescher for your sweetheart, while avoiding deadly ants. Amazingly innovative for its time, it's largely responsible for the popularity of isometric 3D in home computers.

MAGIC MOMENTS

IT'S-A-ME, MARIO!



■ IT WAS IMPRESSIVE enough when your N64 booted up and you were greeted by the mesmerising face of Mario. It became even more impressive when you realised that you could use the N64's controller to contort his face into all sorts of crazy positions.

BOWSER BY THE TAIL



■ BOWSER FIGHTS HAVE always been memorable, but the power of the N64 allowed Miyamoto's team to show off. Grabbing the gigantic turtle by his tail and constantly spinning him, before throwing into the ether, elicits a wonderful sense of joy.

TAKING FLIGHT



■ *SUPER MARIO BROS 3* gave you a tantalising taste of flight, but even that couldn't prepare you for the sheer freedom you felt upon discovering the Wing Cap in *Super Mario 64*. A fantastic moment that still feels immensely satisfying.

that got too close to him, deliver a devastating new bottom bounce, and pull off long jumps, triple jumps and backflips with ease. He was incredibly athletic despite his rotund appearance, but his new skills weren't just to show off the power of Nintendo's new console. Mario's many new skills represented a smorgasboard of choices for the player, allowing him or her to approach Mario's levels in ways that just hadn't been possible in previous platformers.

Super Mario 64's level design was absolutely exemplary. Princess Peach's castle served as a huge hub, with its many rooms allowing Mario to be transported to exciting new game worlds called courses. Admittedly, many of the courses on offer were the staple diet of past platformers – a generic-looking ice world here, an obvious desert world there – but never had they been realised so fully in a game before Nintendo's magnificent release.

UNLIKE PREVIOUS *MARIO* games that presented game worlds split across a set number of levels, the courses of *Super Mario 64* consisted of just one, beautifully designed stage. Each stage was filled with missions that ranged from collecting a set number of red coins to retrieving sunken treasure, racing penguins or facing off against a selection of mini-bosses. Once a mission had been completed Mario would be rewarded with a star. The real beauty of this approach was that the player was allowed to make their own choices throughout each stage, and while each mission was presented to the player in a specific order, it was possible to complete them out of sequence by simply being curious about the game world. This is *Super Mario 64*'s biggest strength because it's constantly challenging the player. Sure you might see a star within tantalising reach, but first you must consider what skills in your considerable repertoire will allow you to acquire it.

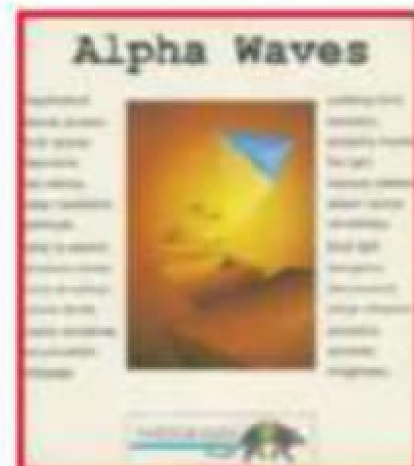
This same approach applies to the way Mario accessed new worlds as well. Virtually every door in Peach's castle had a number on it, which could only be opened once Mario had collected a specific number of stars. Again these doors can be opened in any order (providing you have the set number of stars), building on the multi-path approach that earlier Mario games took. Although *Super Mario 64*'s worlds are fairly generic in their approach, their design is beautiful, with the clean, simple textures still impressing today. As the game progressed, however, the visuals became more elaborate and imaginative, with courses like Tiny-Huge Island and Tick Tock Clock really allowing the developers to run riot. Miyamoto had originally planned over 40 courses but memory issues meant that many were dropped, leaving the player with 15 main courses.

Return to *Super Mario 64* today and its influence can be see in virtually every game you care to look at. Rockstar's Sam Houser once revealed in an interview with *The New York Times* that "Anyone who makes 3D games who says they've not borrowed something from *Mario* or *Zelda* is lying, from the games on Nintendo 64, not necessarily the ones from today". After getting lost in Mario's enchanting world all over again and witnessing the magical touch of Miyamoto in action, we're inclined to agree.

The platformers that were dominant before Super Mario 64 came along

Alpha Waves

Released: **1990**



■ This experimental game was released on the Atari ST, before being ported to the Amiga and PC. It arrived a full six years before *Super Mario 64* and combines exploration with platform-styled gameplay.

Jumping Flash!

Released: **1995**



■ This inventive effort from Exact Co drew great acclaim in the early days of the PlayStation, as there was nothing quite like it on the system. Unlike *Super Mario 64* it utilises a first-person perspective and is a far more arcade-like experience.

Bug!

Released: **1995**



■ *Bug!* was one of the Saturn's earliest platformers, with the annoyingly voiced insect filling in for Sonic, who was absent at launch. It uses clever graphic techniques to create the illusion of 3D, but is otherwise a conventional platformer.

KEY FACTS

■ A 3D *Super Mario* using the FX chip was allegedly in development for the SNES, but Dylan Cuthbert recently debunked this rumour.

■ *Super Mario 64* sold incredibly well for Nintendo, shifting over 11 million units. It's unclear how many of these were based on the N64's pack-in promotion.

■ In addition to being built around the N64's controller, Shigeru Miyamoto and his team also built *Super Mario 64* around its camera and characters.

■ *Mario 64* didn't just influence platformers; Rare's Martin Hollis revealed that *GoldenEye*'s mission structure was borrowed from it too.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

THE SEQUELS



SUPER MARIO GALAXY

Released: **2007**

■ THE WII'S first 3D *Mario* upped the ante for the franchise and the genre in general by introducing all sorts of clever play mechanics. Gravity-based levels were the most obvious, but new power-ups like the Bee and Spring suit also took the gameplay in a fresh direction.



SUPER MARIO GALAXY 2

Released: **2010**

■ SOMEHOW THIS superb sequel managed to improve on virtually every aspect of its incredible predecessor. Levels design was exemplary, the introduction of Yoshi offered new gameplay options, while the level structure and approach feels more like *Super Mario 64*.



SUPER MARIO 3D LAND

Released: **2011**

■ GREAT THINGS were expect from the first 3DS *Mario* game and developers Nintendo EAD Tokyo did not disappoint. Ably assisted by Brownie Brown and DigitalScape, the focus was to make a 3D *Mario* game that played like a 2D one, which was effortlessly achieved.



SUPER MARIO 64 DS

Released: **2004**

■ THIS LAUNCH title for the DS featured a number of notable enhancements, making it worthy of inclusion here. In addition to letting you play as Luigi, Wario and Yoshi, it also introduced a host of excellent mini-games built around the DS's controls.



SUPER MARIO SUNSHINE

Released: **2002**

■ WHILE THE GameCube's first *Mario* title introduced an occasionally wonky camera, it also saw the debut of FLUDD. The Flash Liquidizing Ultra Dousing Device was an excellent item that helped Mario defeat bosses and tackle obstacles.

WHAT SHIGERU MIYAMOTO DID NEXT



METROID PRIME

Released: **2002**

■ WHILE THE core game was created by Retro Studios, Miyamoto had an important role in *Metroid Prime*'s development. Originally intended as a third-person shooter, Miyamoto consistently steered the direction of the game to something that was more his liking. The tough love was worth it, as it became **games™**'s first 10/10.



PIKMIN

Released: **2001**

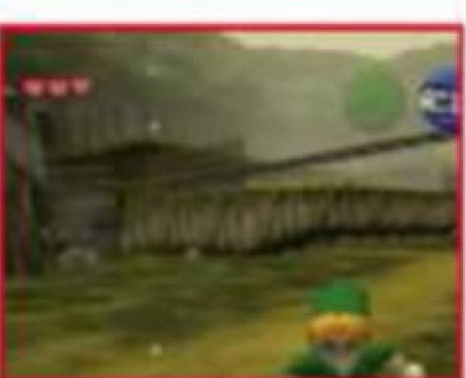
■ MIYAMOTO HAS often based his games on his own personal experiences. While he's never visited another planet (as far as we know) he is a keen gardener. *Pikmin*'s inspiration comes from Miyamoto's love of gardening and it morphed into an intriguing strategy game with interesting game mechanics.



NINTENDOGS

Released: **2005**

■ ORIGINALLY BEGINNING life as a GameCube demo, *Nintendogs* came about when Miyamoto bought a dog for his family. It turned into one of the DS's most popular games, well received by both critics and gamers alike, and eventually going on to sell over six million units. A sequel with added cats launched on the 3DS in 2011.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME

Released: **1998**

■ MIYAMOTO SHARED directing duties with Yochi Yamada, Yoshiaki Koizumi and Eiji Aonuma on *Ocarina Of Time*. The end result was a fantastic addition to the *Zelda* series that, like *Super Mario 64* before it, effortlessly crossed the two dimensional boundary into 3D.



STARFOX 64

Released: **1997**

■ THIS WAS an incredible sequel to the SNES game that offered operatic space battles, a new multiplayer mode and the new 'All-Range Mode', which removed the on-rails gameplay for certain parts of the game. Miyamoto worked in a producing role on this title, but his touch throughout is obvious.

AT ENED XT

Super Mario 64 was a revolutionary platformer that changed the genre. Here we look at its impact on the industry, examining its sequels, the many games it inspired and what its talented creator did next

THE KEY 3D PLATFORMERS THAT FOLLOWED



SKYLANDERS: SPYRO'S ADVENTURE

Released: **2011**

SPYRO WAS first released as a conventional platformer in 1998, but the franchise was rebooted with phenomenal success in 2011. Now known as *Skylanders*, it featured unique toys that would come to life onscreen when placed on the Portal Of Power.



PSYCHONAUTS

Released: **2005**

TIM SCHAFER has gone on record to say that *Super Mario 64* influenced his quirky 2005 release. Boosted by a magnificent story and genuinely interesting characters, it's an interesting addition to the platformer that has all the usual quirkiness you'd expect from a Double Fine game.



PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME

Released: **2003**

JORDAN MECHNER returned to his critically acclaimed Apple II game, reinvigorating both the genre and the franchise with the excellent *Sands Of Time*. It's as much a puzzler as a platformer, with the player having to work out the best route.



JAK & DAXTER: THE PRECURSOR LEGACY

Released: **2001**

WHILE MANY aspects of the gameplay were fairly conventional, it featured impressive behind the scenes work, delivering a seamless world free of mid-game loads, a complete lack of fogging and impressive high resolution textures.



SLY COOPER AND THE THIEVIUS RACCOONUS

Released: **2002**

THIS CLEVER platformer features an entertaining cast of cuddly heroes, clever level design and some imaginative boss fights. Like *Rayman*, the gameplay is fairly conventional, but its rich world and fun characters make it well worth returning to.



BANJO-KAZOOIE

Released: **1998**

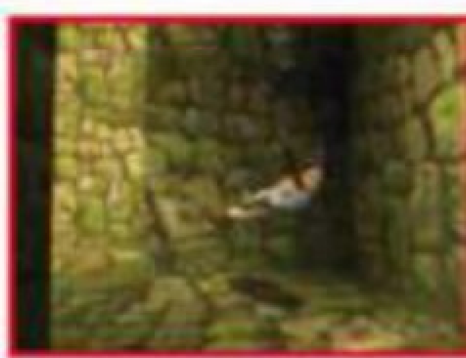
RARE'S OWN love letter to *Super Mario 64* also helped take the platformer in new and exciting directions. It featured the same mission-structured base of *Super Mario 64*, but included two main characters who could interact with each other in a number of interesting ways to slowly unlock the huge game world.



EARTHWORM JIM 3D

Released: **1999**

SHINY ENTERTAINMENT unfortunately felt ill-equipped to work on this 3D sequel, so development was handed over to VIS Entertainment. The end result was sadly a plodding and laborious platformer, which, while it could be funny in places, just couldn't compare favourably to Jim's 2D original adventures.



TOMB RAIDER

Released: **1996**

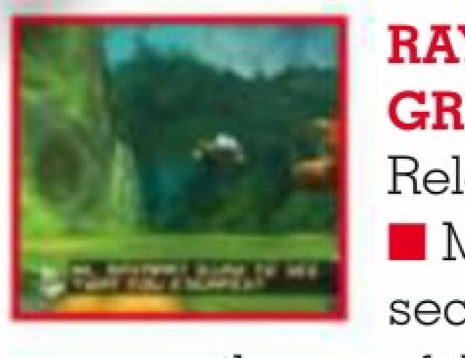
ALTHOUGH TECHNICALLY more rightly classified as an action/adventure game, there's more than enough platforming elements in Lara's first adventure to justify its inclusion here. It lacks *Mario*'s impressive 3D camera, but it nevertheless offers a fantastic sense of scale, particularly on later levels.



SONIC ADVENTURE

Released: **1998**

THERE WAS a lot riding on Sega's first proper 3D *Sonic* platformer, and *Sonic Adventure* didn't really disappoint. The action stages easily captured the essence of the massively successful 2D games. It was later rereleased on GameCube, Xbox 360 and PS3.



RAYMAN 2: THE GREAT ESCAPE

Released: **1999**

MICHEL ANCEL'S second *Rayman* game was easily one of the most impressive 3D platformers around and a huge improvement over his original game, being immensely playable. While the gameplay is fairly linear compared to the approach of *Super Mario 64*, it's full of neat little touches and plenty of sly humour.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to collectable retro treasures

DETAILS

FORMAT: Game Gear
YEAR: 1991
PUBLISHER: Namco
DEVELOPER: In-house
EXPECT TO PAY: £100

GALAGA 2

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner, email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk



EXHIBIT A: These flimsy cardboard boxes are notorious for getting dented and battered in transit. It's a bane for collectors.



EXHIBIT B: Of the small number of games that Namco produced for the Game Gear, this was the only one to get a European release.



EXHIBIT C: *Galaga 2* features much more variety than its predecessors, so the manual probably comes in quite useful.

WHY IT'S RARE

THE REASON WHY copies are uncommon isn't clear, but we can certainly speculate. Namco only released nine games for the Game Gear, and of that small number *Galaga 2* (a port of Namco's *Galaga '88* coin-op) was the only one to receive a European release, so it's likely that it wasn't produced in huge numbers. This handheld port – which, further adding to the confusion, was released as *Galaga '91* in Japan – may have also possibly fallen under the radar of many gamers due to some of the more sophisticated games available for the system. Popular titles such as *Castle Of Illusion* and *Sonic The Hedgehog* would have no doubt been viewed as more attractive to owners of the handheld, and swayed many to pass on this conversion of a sequel to an ancient arcade game. Likely to have not been a massive seller in Europe as a result, this could hold the explanation as to why copies of the game have become hard to come by and its value has climbed over the years. That and the fact that it's the only portable version of *Galaga '88* Namco ever released.





Worth Playing?

GALAGA '88 IS considered by many shooter fans to be not only the best game in the series, but one of the best *Space Invaders*-style shooters period. The third game in the series, *Galaga '88* saw Namco give the graphics an overhaul and introduce bonus rounds as well as proper boss sections. The most innovative new features, though, were multiple endings and branching routes; these could be selected by choosing to collect blue canisters dropped by destroyed enemies, warping your ship to different – and more challenging – dimensions, which helped add variety to its bug-blasting gameplay and expand its longevity. Despite its popularity and success, *Galaga '88* appeared on very few home formats, gracing the TurboGrafx-16 (as *Galaga '90*), the obscure Japanese Sharp X68000 home computer (*Galaga '88 Arrangement*) and, of course, the Game Gear (*Galaga 2/ Galaga '91*). The Game Gear port is a loose adaptation, as it's missing a number of features from the coin-op, and doesn't mimic the look and arrangement of the arcade stages either. It's still a decent enough shooter, though, with colourful graphics and smooth gameplay.



FACT!
When developing *Galaga*, Namco intended it to be a separate shooter from *Galaxian* and not a sequel.



I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Matt Gander**
Occupation: **Engineer**

What is it about the Game Gear, and *Galaga 2* in particular, that is attractive to you?
I've owned a Game Gear since high school. It must have been around 1995, as support for it was starting to dry up. About three years ago I started collecting for the machine, first simply buying the games I wanted to own in my youth, before eventually aiming to get a full set of all 196 European releases. I managed to finish the set around a year ago, although I'd say roughly half of them are unboxed. *Galaga 2* was one of the final games I needed.

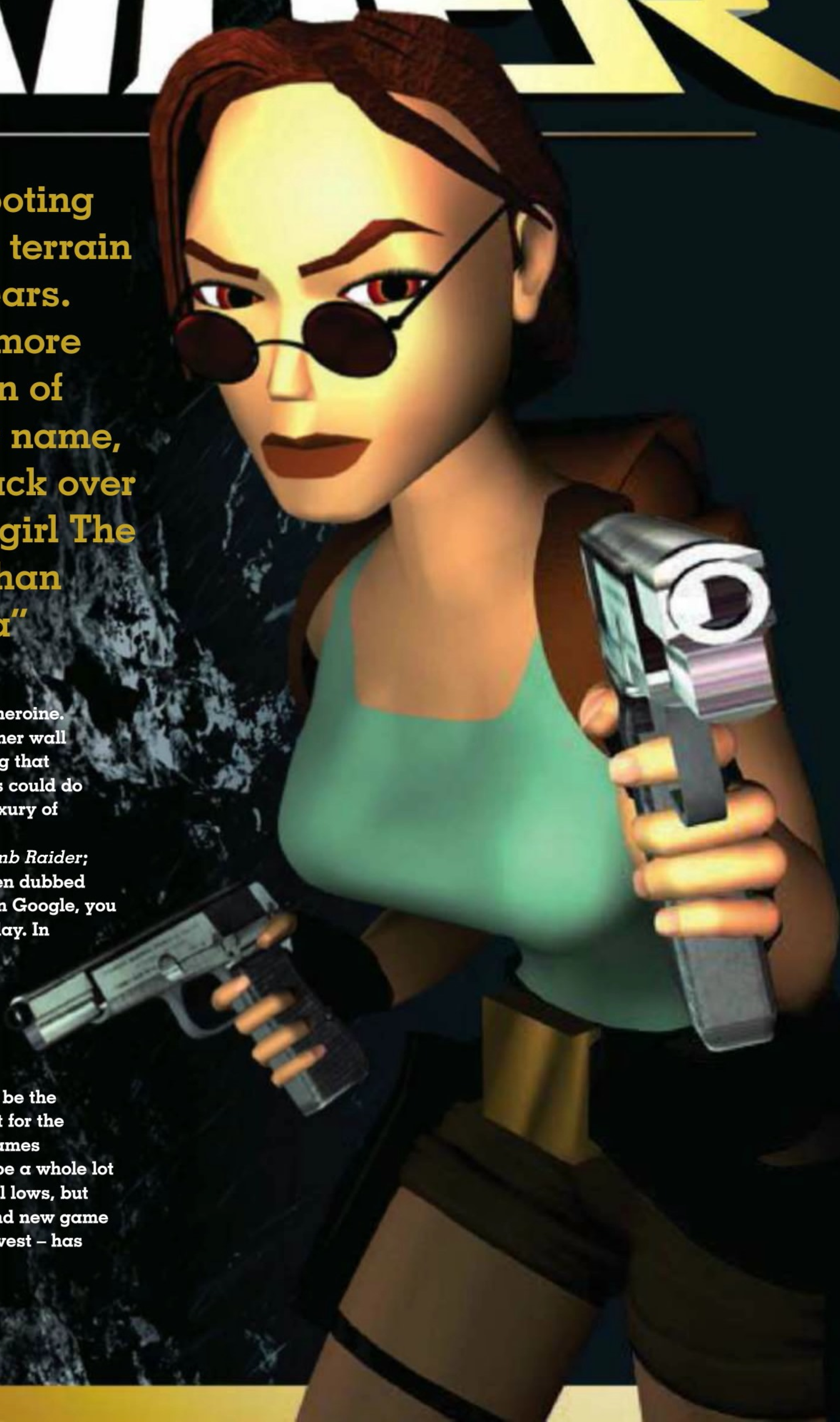
Please tell us how/where you found your copy of *Galaga 2*.
eBay was the source for this one. When I was collecting, checking eBay for new additions three or four times a day had become quite the habit – an expensive one at that.

What condition was the game in and how much did you pay for it?
Considering a lot of boxed Game Gear games are found in poor condition due to their flimsy cardboard boxes, it's in pretty good condition. Fortunately, it didn't get crushed in the post either, which is something boxed Game Gear games are prone to if the seller chooses to simply shove it in a jiffy bag. I paid around £17 for it on a Buy It Now auction, which is a fraction of its actual estimated worth. Those regular eBay visits paid off eventually.

Do you actually play it and, if so, what do you think of it?
I already owned the Japanese version – known as *Galaga '91* – beforehand and sunk a bit of time into that. As the two are identical, I can't say I've played *Galaga 2* a lot. Given the choice I'd rather play one of Game Gear's other shooters, like *Power Strike II* or *Super Space Invaders*. *Galaga 2* isn't a bad game by any means, but the aforementioned are a little flasher and more varied.

Finally, would you ever consider selling it, or is it yours for life?
I've had offers in the past asking if I'd sell it due to its rarity. If I was going to sell it, though, it would probably be with the rest of my collection as a whole. But who knows? If the right offer came along I could be swayed.

THE RETRO GUIDE TO... TOMB RAIDER



Lara Croft has been shooting her way across perilous terrain in Tomb Raider for 17 years. Now she's starring in a more mature, rebooted version of the game that made her name, games™ takes a look back over the career of the digital girl The Face said was "Bigger than Pammy, wiser than Yoda"

SHE WAS ARGUABLY gaming's first true heroine. A character who thwacked against the inner wall of the typical gamer's cranium by showing that whatever male protagonists could do, female ones could do that teeny-weeny bit better. In 3D. And with the luxury of smooth, lifelike animation.

A lot has been written about Lara Croft and *Tomb Raider*; not all of it has been about the game. She has been dubbed the Silicon Chick. If you perform a quick search on Google, you will see stats that have nothing to do with gameplay. In part, Lara was a cynical attempt at getting the wider world talking, but it also helped to ease gaming into the mainstream and encouraged females to get playing, if they weren't already.

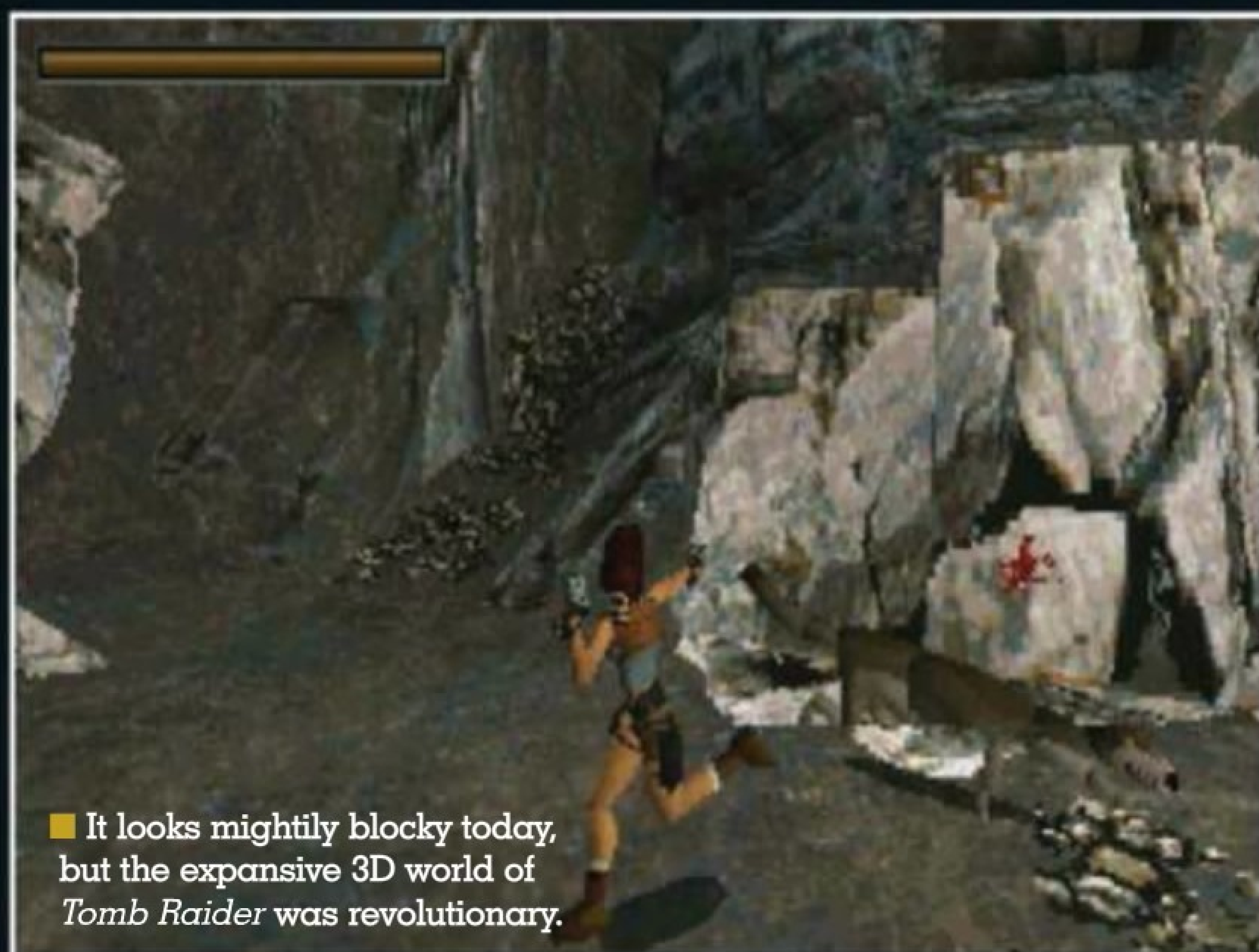
Yet the *Tomb Raider* franchise would never have been the big seller that it was – nor prove to be the catalyst for a couple of okay-ish films – were it not for the arse-grindingly harsh explorative nature of the games themselves, which, as it happens, also proved to be a whole lot of fun. It has had its highlights and some very real lows, but the fact that we've been excitedly awaiting a brand new game shows that Croft's appeal – unlike that turquoise vest – has barely diminished with age.



1996 TOMB RAIDER

■■■ BROUGHT TO life by a young Toby Gard with the intention of producing a movie-like experience for players, Lara Cruz – later to be renamed Croft – made her debut in a game of 15 chapters that took in the delights of worldwide locations, from Atlantis to Rome. The camera swept across the lavish, claustrophobic chambers and the designers knew they were on to something, but they weren't too sure of what it was. "We were trying something new and ambitious, but for all we knew other companies were making similar games," says Gavin Rummery, one of the programmers on the original game. "Full 3D characters and environments were clearly the next big step in gaming, so we didn't know what we were doing would turn out to be so unique."

In the original game, Lara had been persuaded to find the ancient Atlantean Scion from a tomb in Qualopec, Peru, only to be double-crossed by the person who asked her to recover it. The levels were packed with puzzles and terrible beasts that could be dispatched by the firing of Lara's twin guns, punctuated by cinematic cut-scenes that linked the story together. Rummery says Lara was initially going to sport a ponytail, but the programmers hadn't figured out how to implement it in the debut game. Out went the sunglasses, too. "The original *Tomb Raider* came out when there were next to no strong female lead characters in games, and Toby was such a good animator that people warmed to Lara straight away," says Rummery.


■ It looks mightily blocky today, but the expansive 3D world of *Tomb Raider* was revolutionary.

1997 TOMB RAIDER II

■■■ LARA WAS back, but something had changed. "We actually made her breasts bigger with every sequel," says animator Richard Morton. The second title had a massive air of expectation and Lara was becoming famous. She was starring in Lucozade adverts and U2 were interested in putting her into their PopMart tour. The game itself featured more realistic environments, more outdoor levels and more moves for Lara. "While the style stayed pretty much the same, there were lots of advancements with the engine that allowed for better-looking levels," says Morton. "The engine was vastly overhauled to speed it up and allow more complex environments; the lighting system was also improved, with dynamic lights added for the flares and other choice objects in the world. We knew we had to make Lara look better, give her more polygons; we also knew the player wanted to see her in more costumes, so we did that too."

Although the camera could cause players problems with its strange angles for some tricky jumps, the game benefited from the addition of vehicles, most notably the speedboat in Venice. The aforementioned flares would also light up rooms to uncover dark secrets – such as the larger array of enemies.





1998 TOMB RAIDER III

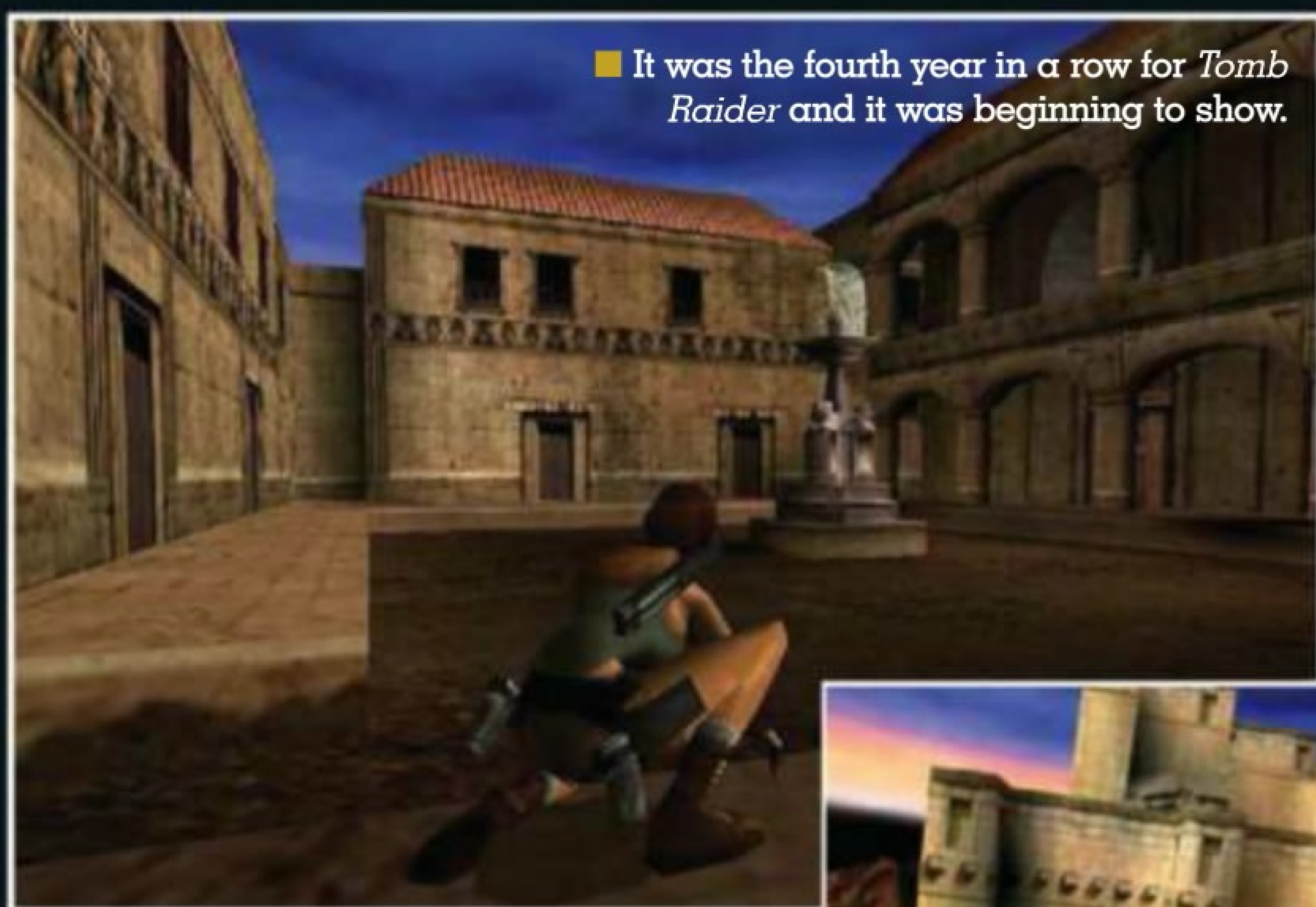
■■■ BY THIS point, *Tomb Raider* was very much an annual event, even though the developers hadn't really planned for a sequel after the first game. They certainly didn't expect *TRII* to have sold four million copies to become, at that moment, the fastest-selling videogame of all time. The yearly releases were putting the franchise in danger of two things, however: boring the pants off gamers and running out of ideas.

That said, *TRIII* was actually a good game that stood up to the first two titles, despite some lacklustre levels that, with more time, could have been worked up to greater perfection. "We also had a much shorter development cycle, but we had to deliver more. Even with a working engine it still took ages to build the levels," explains Morton, who designed levels for the third game.

It was clear that the graphic artists were becoming rather adept at PlayStation artwork and there were lots of lovely touches, such as light shining through windows and foliage. Cut-scenes and video sequences were becoming more important too. Gone were the textured bricks and in were triangular building blocks and a higher 512x240 resolution. For a PlayStation game, it looked outstanding.






It was the fourth year in a row for *Tomb Raider* and it was beginning to show.



1999 TOMB RAIDER: THE LAST REVELATION

THE TEAM that developed the fourth game was, by and large, a new one. Just eight people had worked on the debut game and Gavin Rummery, Stuart Atkinson, Heather Gibson and Neal Boyd stuck together for more than five years after the second title, but on non-*TR* projects. Each of those team members had their own interests. "I was more into refining the control system and creating new moves for Lara, as well as introducing vehicles for her to use," says Atkinson, who was lead designer on *TRII*.

But in rolled *The Last Revelation*… "It all started to go a little sour," he continues. "At this stage the game was just a cash cow. It was all about the money." He says the driving force had switched from creativity and it showed; the pace was noticeably slower and while it harked back, in some ways, to the first game, times had changed and people expected more and they didn't get it. It wasn't all bad since the puzzles had greater logic, but the actual core remained the same familiar gameplay, always in danger of becoming stale.

2000 TOMB RAIDER (GBC)

THE EXPANSIVE nature of *Tomb Raider* made it the perfect fit for home consoles, but it was squeezed onto the Game Boy Color at the turn of the century, the first time the series had been made available on a portable device. There was more than a whiff of the original *Prince Of Persia* about this game, spread over 14 levels and coming in 2D since 3D would have been a challenge no one would have fancied rising to. The game was ambitious despite the small-form nature of the handheld, given there were 25 moves (which arguably made it more fiddly to play) and some very well-designed levels. It wasn't as stunning as the earlier games, but it showed Lara in a whole new dimension.



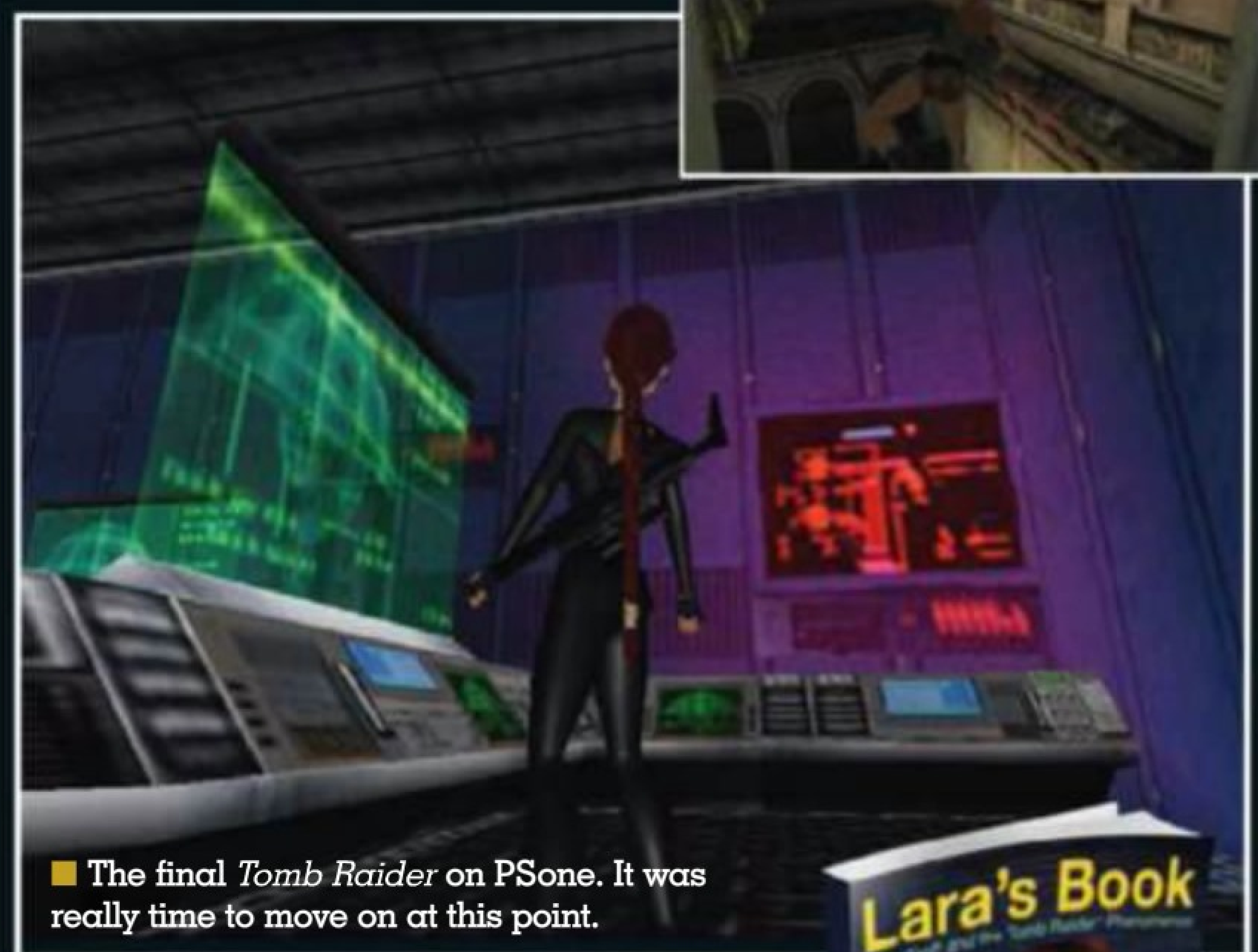




2000 TOMB RAIDER CHRONICLES

WHAT WAS perhaps more incredible than the fact *Tomb Raider* was getting its fifth consecutive outing was that all of this was being delivered on the original PlayStation – as well as the Dreamcast and PC in this case. Unfortunately, though, the mature nature of the console and the ability for developers by this time to get much out of it wasn't being shown in the progress of *Tomb Raider*. Told in flashback form, it may as well have harked back to better times – times when the likes of *Metal Gear Solid* hadn't been invented, perhaps. Technically it was much improved, but the gameplay was rapidly becoming as stale as a shot-down T-rex.




The final *Tomb Raider* on PSone. It was really time to move on at this point.



THE BOOK

A literary phenomenon

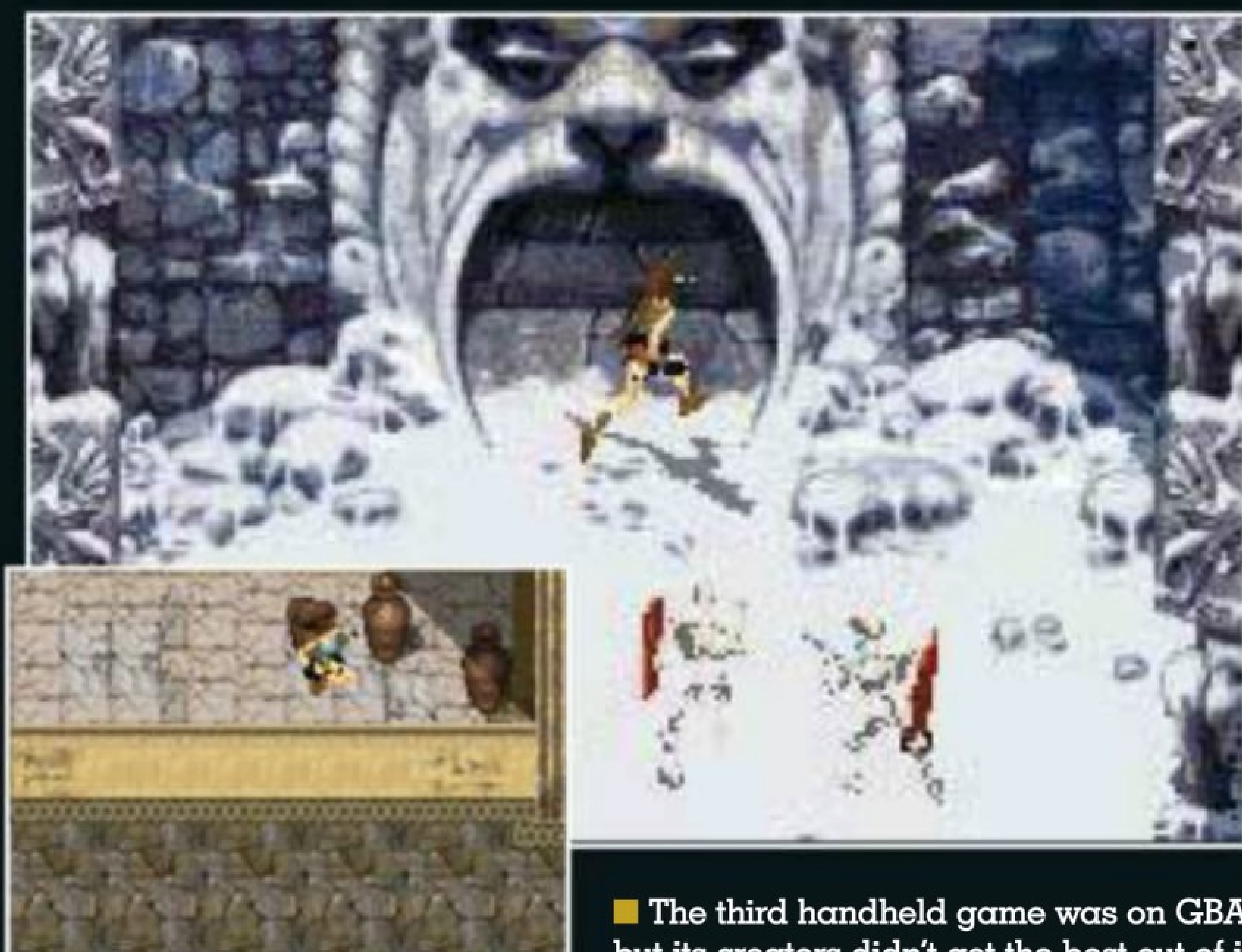
MOST PEOPLE know about the Lara Croft movies – *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* from 2001 and *Tomb Raider: The Cradle Of Life* two years later – but the sheer appetite for the character had already been given a dollop of literary analysis. Author Douglas Coupland wrote a book dedicated to Ms Croft, called *Lara's Book*, which mixed fiction, theory and strategy. "She is a composition of devastating force, set against a backdrop of intelligence and intuition," he wrote of Lara. "Perhaps it's that juxtaposition which draws me to her." It also included thousands of pictures of Lara, game developer interviews and a look at Lara's impact on the games industry that was being noticed even in 1998, just two years after the debut game.

Lara has also appeared in another book: *Guinness World Records*. Lara was, in 2010, named the most successful videogame heroine, most recognisable female in a videogame and most detailed game character (32,816 rendered polygons formed her figure in *Tomb Raider: Underworld*). She also has the most real-life stand-ins thanks to the string of models who have played her. And Croft was involved in the most successful live-action transfer. It's these stats, rather than certain others (34D-24-35), that stand out the most over the years.


It looked better but continued the Prince Of Persia gameplay of the first portable outing.

2001 TOMB RAIDER: CURSE OF THE SWORD

THE GAME Boy Color version of *Tomb Raider* had performed rather well; inevitably, there was a handheld sequel. Five large areas and a strained storyline about lifting a curse on Lara gave rise to a jaunt across New York (few tombs being raided here, then), thereby giving the appearance of placing an iconic character into any random setting, one which didn't quite cut it when compared to the pyramids and caverns of old. It was beginning to feel as if the developers were struggling for direction. They certainly had brain freeze when it came to puzzles, given the near absence of them.


The third handheld game was on GBA, but its creators didn't get the best out of it.

2002 TOMB RAIDER: THE PROPHECY

WITH NO *Tomb Raider* console release for the second year in a row, the Game Boy Advance was used to bridge the gap with the series' third handheld release. In the same way that the home console games had stuck to tried, tested and patience-testing gameplay, so the handheld games were barely moving on from the staple genres of the Eighties – not always a bad thing, but in this case it was. The better power of the GBA didn't quite allow for a 3D port of the original games; however it did lend itself to an isometric approach. Quips were dull and jarring – "This place could do with some air" – and it was justifiably judged by many to be the worst of the Ninty handheld outings.

2003 TOMB RAIDER: THE ANGEL OF DARKNESS

TOMB RAIDER made its return after an absence of two years on the main consoles, but, despite the timescale, it appeared rushed and there were fewer tombs. It was a bitter blow for Core Design as the stakes were high at this time. "We started to experience a bit of a backlash," admits Richard Morton, who has worked on most of the *Tomb Raider* games. "As with any phenomenon – and *Tomb Raider* was certainly that – the press began to dislike it. They don't look too favourably on a franchise being too successful." The game had moved from the PSone to the PS2 and, although it looked great, the controls were terrible with an unforgivable delay and there was barely any stealth. Eidos, which published the games, wasn't happy at all. Yet, you got the impression the plot had been lost. Eidos and Core announced in 2002 that Lara Croft had signed with Hollywood's Creative Artists Agency. "Lara Croft represents a dynamic personality for CAA and a groundbreaking type of client for our business," said CAA's Elie Dekel at the time. "The fact is, Lara Croft is a star, Lara Croft is a $1 billion brand and Lara Croft is recognised by 95 per cent of males between the ages of 12-25. She's a pop culture icon of the highest calibre." It even ran a quote from Lara. Not the model who played her, but the actual character…










Lara was becoming too big for her boots and *Tomb Raider* seriously needed a reboot – up the arse.

2006 TOMB RAIDER: LEGEND

■■■ WITH AROUND 30 million games sold, Eidos didn't want to let *Tomb Raider* die. Three years after *Angel Of Darkness*, the baton was passed to Crystal Dynamics in a shock decision. *Guinness World Records* had named Lara Croft as the 'Most Successful Human Videogame Heroine'. It said Lara was recognised for "transcending the boundaries of videogames and becoming a recognisable figure in mainstream society". There was work to do, though, to restore the reputation of the brand. *Tomb Raider: Legend* went back to basics, but also added items such as a grappling hook, which was great for swinging and essential for solving some puzzles. Weak spots could be eyed using a special device and Lara had a pair of binoculars. The three-year wait was worth it and it was altogether a slicker affair.



■ Crystal Dynamics took over and produced a game that was utterly amazing.





2007 TOMB RAIDER: ANNIVERSARY

■■■ CRYSTAL DYNAMICS retained the engine of *Legend* when it created its homage to the success of *Tomb Raider* with an anniversary edition. The classic environments of the original game were used and gamers were able to experience Peru, Greece and Egypt, among many more. What it did was build on the revitalised game from a year before with a realisation that safe, dated, uninspired retreads wouldn't cut it any more. It was a game that not only stood apart as great in and of itself, but also showed the wonderful nature of the debut game and, at the same time, its clunkiness in comparison. Gamers lapped up this game to the point that many lauded it as the best in the series.

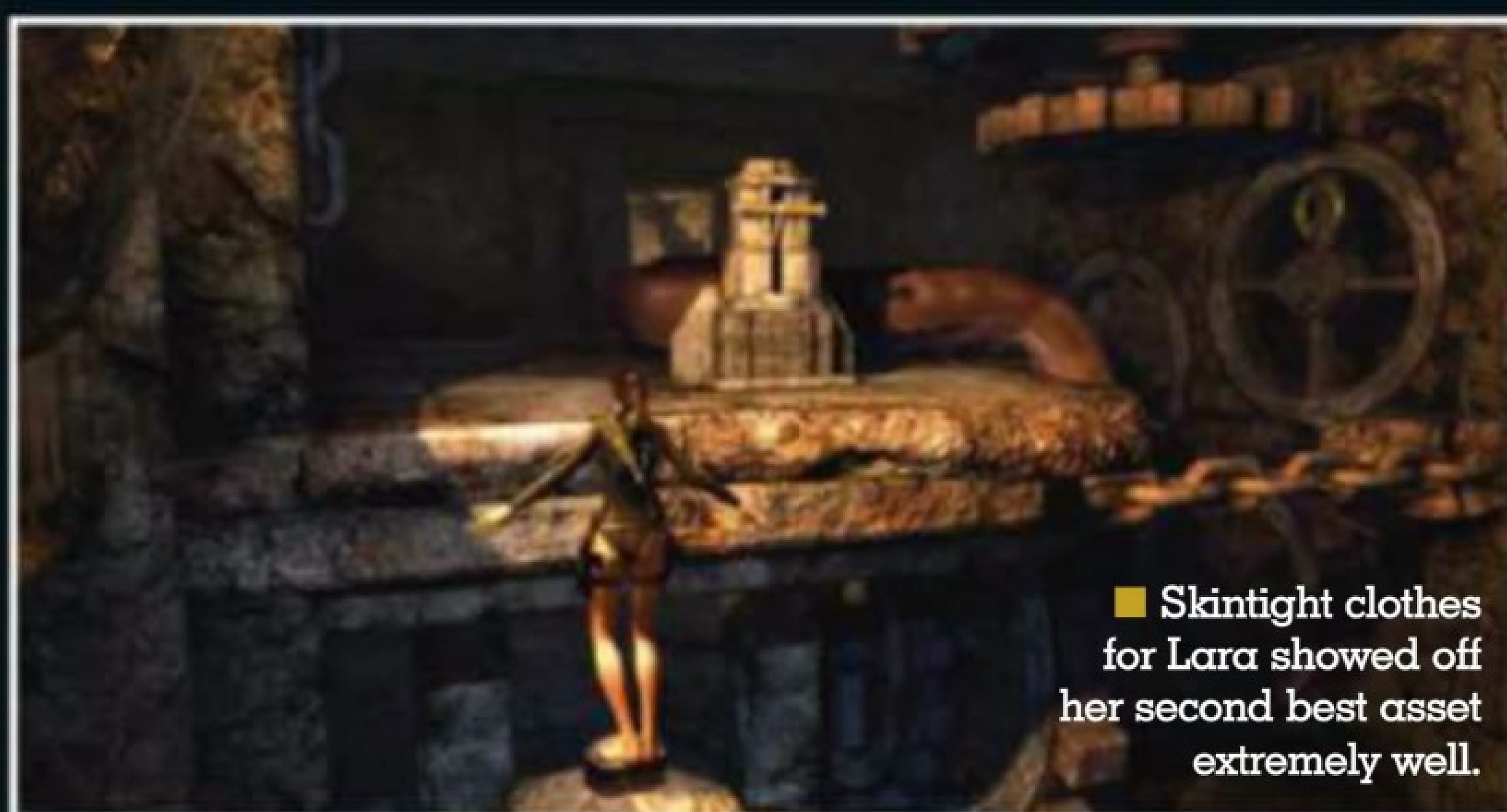






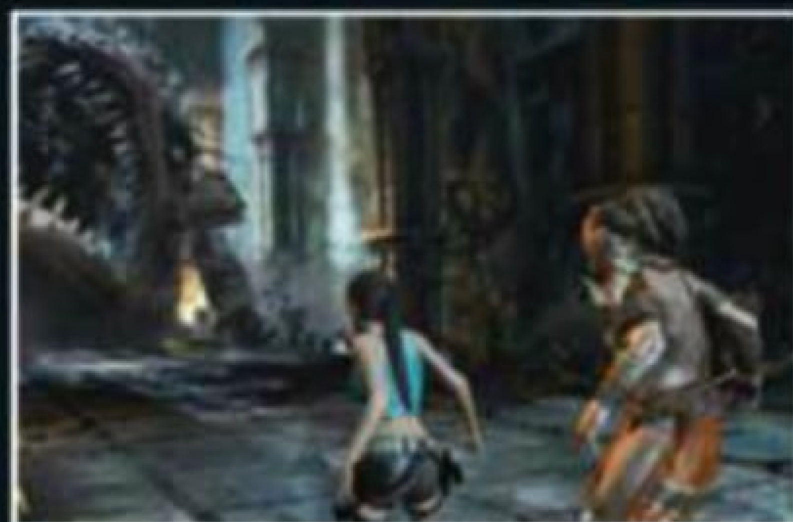
2008 TOMB RAIDER: UNDERWORLD

■■■ *TOMB RAIDER Anniversary* was, as it suggested, a one-off – a backward-looking yet inspired homage. *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, on the other hand, was the eighth game proper and was, once again, developed by Crystal Dynamics, which was now secure in its role as *TR* developer. *Underworld* was the first *Tomb Raider* game for the PS3, but there was also exclusive downloadable content for Xbox 360. The whole game was a continuation of what had gone in *Legend*, to the point of there being a recap. It was, therefore, playing to fans, and the flexibility to roam was retained. Quick Time Events were removed, though, and it relied more on your wits, enhancing the game somewhat.



■ Skintight clothes for Lara showed off her second best asset extremely well.

"UNDERWORLD WAS A CONTINUATION OF WHAT HAD GONE IN LEGEND, TO THE POINT OF THERE BEING A RECAP"






2010 LARA CROFT AND THE GUARDIAN OF LIGHT

■■■ IT WAS interesting to note the title of this game, 'Tomb Raider' having been dropped in favour of namechecking Lara, putting her firmly at centre stage. But then this was a different type of game and it was never intended to fit in with the rest of the series, preferring to be seen as a spin-off title that allowed for some ingenious puzzling. The downloadable game had a fixed 3D viewpoint that was isometric in nature and didn't zoom into the shapely figure of Ms Croft. Cut-scenes were a series of animated stills that worked incredibly well. The retro styling combined with relatively short levels made for a beautiful casual game that went on to be ported to iOS, BlackBerry PlayBook and Android, therefore taking the accolade for best handheld *TR* game too.

2013 TOMB RAIDER

■■■ CRYSTAL DYNAMICS has worked wonders with its daring new reboot. There's a gorier, grittier side to the series that hasn't been seen before. It's graphically lush and features a number of interesting play mechanics, but Lara is the real star of the show due to the sheer amount of humanity that Crystal Dynamics and writer Rhianna Pratchett have injected into her. This is a Lara who genuinely grows as the game progresses and while her transformation from scared teen to ruthless killing machine occasionally jars, it's rare to see a videogame character handled with this sort of movie-like care. An exciting and invigorating start for Lara's return, then, and apparently the title Crystal Dynamics always wanted to make. We can only imagine where the team goes next, but we can't wait to see it.


■ Lara's latest adventure is a fantastic return to form. It's an origin story to be proud of.

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT
Lara via satellite



■ AS WELL being a star on the usual array of consoles and computers, Lara Croft's games have also appeared via a satellite set-top box. Customers of Sky Digital were able to enjoy a service called Gamestar in the early Noughties. In 2002, Eidos did a deal with the broadcaster and soon viewers were able to play *Tomb Raider Apocalypse, Episode 1: The Eye Of Osiris*, which had been developed by Mind's Eye Productions.

In 2003 a sequel was produced – *Tomb Raider Apocalypse, Episode 2: The Shadow Falls*. Players had to guide Lara over ten levels through a huge multistorey warehouse brimming with computers, high-level security, lifts and armed guards. They were able to use the Sky remote as well as a special gamepad that was available. In the same year, *Tomb Raider Apocalypse, Episode 3: Armageddon* was released; this time Lara was tasked with finding the mythical Eye Of Osiris in order to save the world from certain destruction.

To play, satellite viewers had to press the Interactive button on the Sky remote and select Sky Gamestar from the interactive services menu. The games costs 75p for unlimited plays per session.

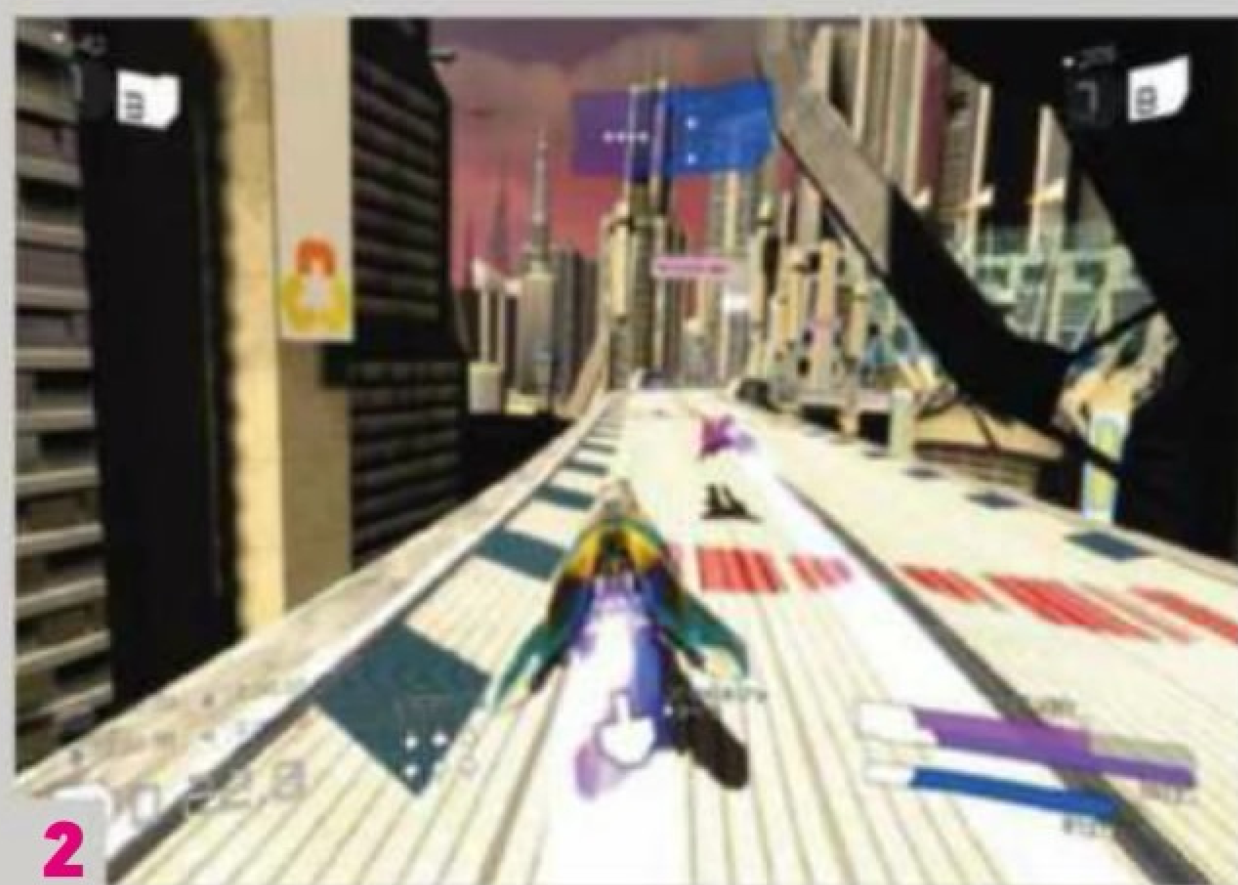


ESSENTIALS

10 PS3 GAMES TO PLAY BEFORE PS4 ARRIVES

PS4 is coming, and it's incredibly exciting. But PS3 is still here, and it's got one of the most diverse and enjoyable catalogues of exclusives ever seen on a console. With some true landmarks of gaming available – most of them on the cheap – you simply *must* experience them before you move on to the next generation.

1


2


3


4


5


LittleBigPlanet 2
Developer: Media Molecule

1 *LittleBigPlanet 2* defies genre classification and defines 'game-changing shift'. That's how important Media Molecule's Sackboy sequel is, both to PS3 and to gaming. Where the original gave you the ability to play, create and share platforming levels, the sequel threw open the creative floodgates. From top-down shooters to racing, adventures and puzzlers (whatever you want, basically), *LBP 2* has the tools to make it a reality. Even for those who just want to play, there's a bustling community of creators serving up fantastic original ideas we'd have bought for actual money. If you like games – *any* games – *LBP 2* has something you'll love.

WipEout HD
Developer: Studio Liverpool

2 Sony's futuristic racer has always served as proof of the cutting edge of every PlayStation platform. *WipEout HD* is no different; glorious 1080p 60FPS graphics in vast open circuits married with a blistering speed show what the PS3 can really do. Having seen PS4 games now, we maintain this would still look more at home on next gen. There's nothing faster on any console, and with its companion *HD Fury* expansion it brings an absurd amount of tracks, ships and modes for a very low price. Even if you've never played *WipEout*, you owe it to yourself to give the now-defunct Studio Liverpool's swansong the chance it so richly deserves.

God Of War 3
Developer: Sony Santa Monica

3 With the likes of *DmC*, *Bayonetta* and *MGR: Revengeance* knocking about, there has certainly been no shortage of hack-'n'-slash action this generation. But no one does it quite like Kratos. The combat is still in equal measure some of the silkiest and sickest on any console, alongside a sense of scale no game can match. Kratos's weapon set is as powerful as it is varied, a delight to wield as you slice the guts from a centaur or slam blades into the bloodied eye of a cyclops. From screen-filling boss battles and sprawling mountainsides to eye-watering set pieces, *God Of War 3* is one of the greatest exclusives on PlayStation.

Metal Gear Solid 4
Developer: Kojima Productions

4 Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid* series is as sublime as it is eccentric – a rarity in that it's both self-indulgent and incredible, full stop. *MGS4* doesn't have to pull any punches or change itself to become mainstream; it knows it's mental and revels in it. With its war-torn opening, lengthy Otacon chats and the 90-minute final clip, *MGS4* is Kojima's glorious gift to fans. It's also an incredible game, even for those (heathens) who've never touched the series, blending tight gunplay with madcap action sequences and ingenious boss battles. *Metal Gear Solid 4* is the pinnacle of one of PlayStation's most iconic and treasured series.

Uncharted 2
Developer: Naughty Dog

5 From the relentless pacing to the unforgettable action sequences, not a second of game time is wasted, and not one shred of potential is unfulfilled. A shoot-out atop a moving train as it winds along a mountain path becomes a brawl with a boss inside the same carriages – before smashing off the cliff edge, forcing Drake to clamber up the transport's exterior as it hangs precariously. But it's not just the immense set pieces; it's the precise and varied gunplay, compelling narrative-looping story, Hollywood-beating script and the sheer beauty of its custom-built engine. The greatest adventure on PS3.



Demon's Souls
Developer: From Software

6 *Demon's Souls* hates you and wants you to die. Well, that's how it can feel. Make no mistake: this is a game hewn in the fires of old-school game design, born to challenge, test and terrify. It richly rewards those ballsy enough to take it on, like the arcade titles of the Eighties re-imagined in a modern engine. It introduced an innovative social element: messages scrawled on walls inside its game world from other players warn of impending doom, while ghosts of fallen warriors replay as projections to highlight perils. One of the biggest surprise successes of this generation and an absolute must-play (if you dare).

Journey
Developer: thatgamecompany

7 *Journey* is a milestone in gaming; a 90-minute miracle of pitch-perfect gameplay mixed with stunning environmental design. Putting you in the shoes of a scarf-clad desert wanderer, *Journey* has no HUD, no tutorial and no words. You get up, you walk, jump and fly through its large-scale environments. Forget headshots and high scores. When you meet a fellow traveller in this world you can't even communicate beyond a one-note circle-tap bloop. But, without any distinguishing identity at all, an unspoken bond forms, sometimes staying strong, sometimes falling apart. Whatever happens, you'll always have the journey.

Valkyria Chronicles
Developer: Sega

8 Mixing ingenious top-down RTS strategising with a top-notch RPG adventure, *Valkyria Chronicles* is one of the most compelling reasons to own a PS3. Unlike other RTS war games, *Valkryia* drops you down onto the battlefield once you've chosen your move, allowing you to run for cover and line up a shot on enemy troops and tanks directly – not just limiting the action to maps and menus. This means you'll need tactical strength on two perspectives at once, the resultant micro/macro blend breeding a delicious, addictive depth few games can match. Combined with its cel-shaded art style, it's utterly compelling.

Tokyo Jungle
Developer: Sony Japan

9 *Tokyo Jungle*'s main draw is that it's just so different. From a technical standpoint, it's vastly inferior to everything else on these pages. But it's a game about guiding wild lions, hyenas and other prowling, howling beasts to survival in a humanless post-apocalyptic Japan. Concept is king. Starting at the bottom of the food chain, you need to use animalistic guile to hunt your way to the top. The objectives are often simple: consume calories, kill animals, reach a certain area. But it's in the thrill of conquering a bigger foe – the underdog victory moments – that the main draw surfaces. It's wild, untamed and unmatched by anything else.

Gran Turismo 5
Developer: Polyphony Digital

10 Everybody hates *Gran Turismo 5*; an antiquated, bloated leftover from a bygone era… if you believe the internet. But Polyphony's most ambitious racer is still the deepest car sim ever made and an unapologetic love letter to technological achievement. With more than 1,000 cars, 70+ tracks and an ever-changing raft of online events, *GT5* still looks and feels as good as ever. Not a revolution, but the bold result of 15 years of evolution for a series that is not merely a game; it's a deep driving simulator, a hobbyist's workshop, a self-indulgent motor-gasm and a cultural phenomenon.

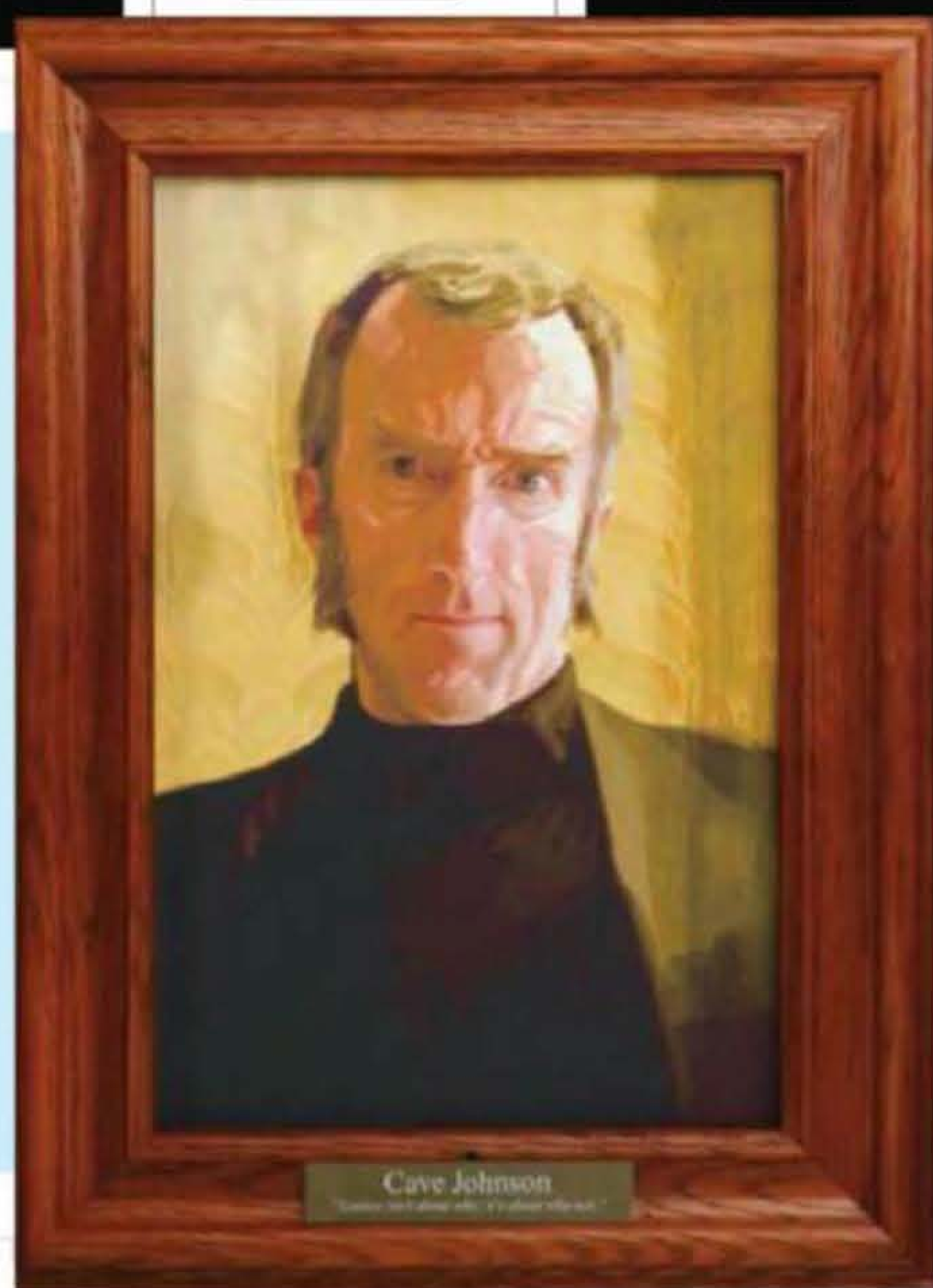
THE VAULT

TALKING CAVE JOHNSON PORTRAIT

MANUFACTURER: **Valve** / PRICE: **£27**

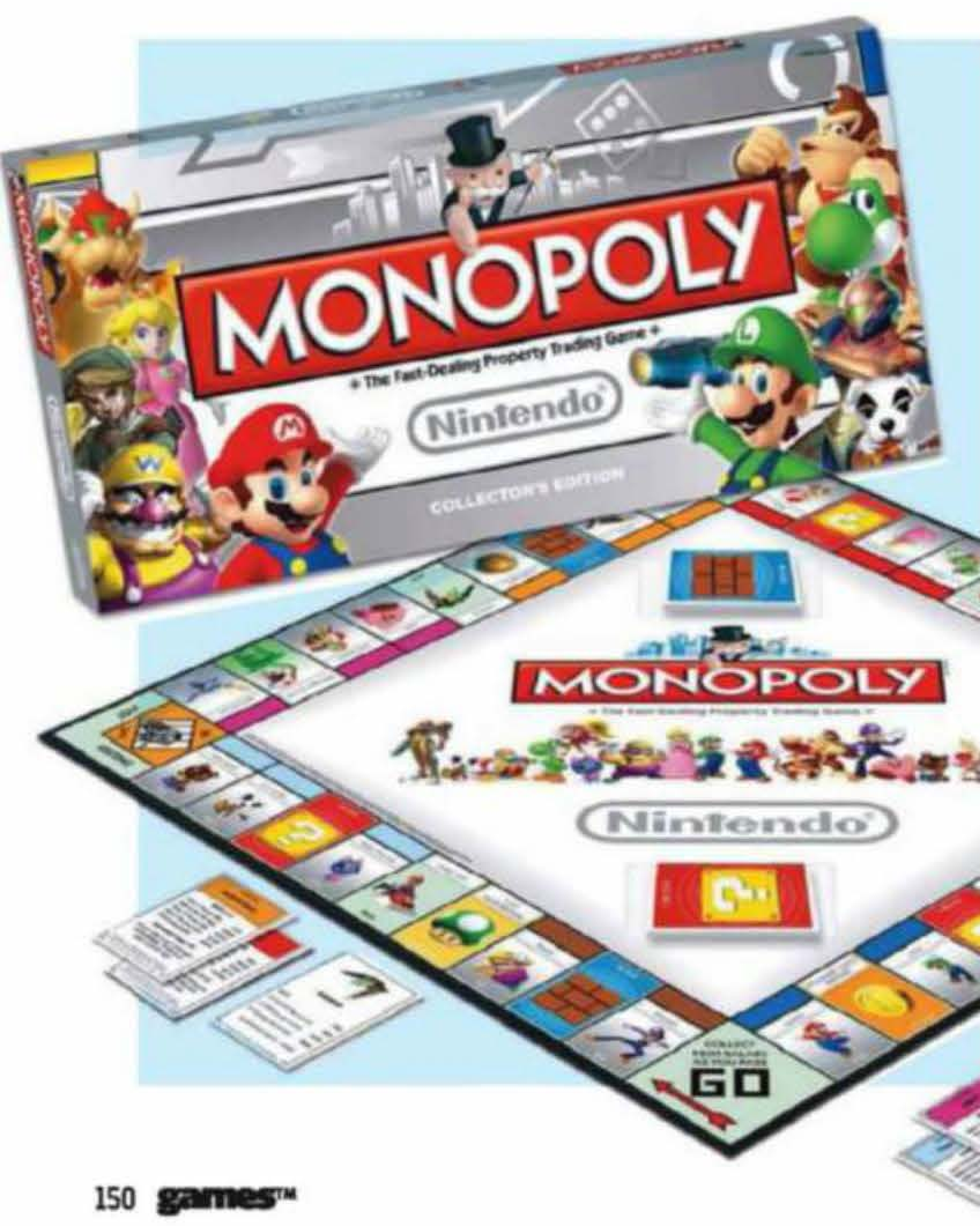
AN EMPTY SPACE on any abode's wall is tantamount to an empty space in a person's heart. Lucky for prospective scientists and test subjects, then, that the musty phizog of Aperture's Cave Johnson can adequately fulfil both those vacancies in this officially licensed talking portrait of *Portal 2*'s absent overseer. Perhaps not as timeless as *Big Mouth Billy Bass*, **games™** has still found it to be the perfect inspirational tool around the office, listening as we gaze into his steely eyes, his gravely tones spewing motivational rhetoric to anyone near enough to set off its motion sensor.

Now if only we could have a passive-aggressive, malevolent AI to monitor and evaluate our daily performance, then perhaps we'd get the magazine to the printers on time.



NINTENDO MONOPOLY

MANUFACTURER: **USAopoly** / PRICE: **£30**



WHILE THE INCLUSION of several metallic Nintendo characters is not guaranteed to relieve the monotonous frustration associated with the argument-inducing game that simply refuses to end, it certainly adds a welcome touch of whimsy to *Monopoly*. Rather than travelling around the board collecting real estate, players must acquire Nintendo franchises, such as *Pikmin*, *Donkey Kong* and *The Legend Of Zelda*, in their quest to humiliate their nearest and dearest through the very un-Nintendo notion of financial bankruptcy. Alternatively, you could relabel the board with THQ properties and re-enact the now-defunct studio's terrible month of January.



TOP THREE TEES FROM GAMERABILIA



SLEEPING DOGS WEI SHEN T-SHIRT

Has Wei just chopped off that dragon's tail? Who knows! But at least *Sleeping Dogs*' arresting art style looks decent on this bit of skin concealer.



LEGEND OF ZELDA COAT OF ARMS T-SHIRT

The central montage of *Zelda* iconography makes for an wonderful print.



SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV VEGA T-SHIRT

We've said it before, but *Street Fighter IV*'s art style is superb. Bathe in its wonderousness with this edgy Vega design.

FLUX

MANUFACTURER: **STEELSERIES** / PRICE: **£103.99**

WE ALL LIKE to hear the games we're playing, and there's an infinite amount of audio equipment out there that enables gamers to immerse themselves further into the cacophony of war turned all the way up to 11. SteelSeries' line of *Flux* headsets excel in pumping out quality sounds, not to mention boasting some fetching customisable ear cushions, ear cup plates and cables, so you can amplify your aesthetical gawkiness.





RAZER ORBWEAVER

MANUFACTURER: **RAZER** / PRICE: **£114.99**

THE LATEST GAMING peripheral from gaming equipment manufacturer Razer looks about as graceful as duct taping a fax machine to your wrist. But the *Razer Orbweaver* has its niche in the hardcore PC crowd, featuring 20 programmable mechanic keys, a customisable eight-way thumb pad and a multitude of various other bells and whistles grafted to every conceivable inch of this handheld keyboard. It even glows in the dark, which means that when your eyes are straining from another eight-hour raid, your wrist need not.

BIOSHOCK 2 SPLICER WELDER

MANUFACTURER: **NECA PRICE** / PRICE: **£23.99**



FANCY TURNING UP to a costume party in a get-up that absolutely zero people will understand? Well, maybe this *BioShock 2* Splicer mask is right for you. You'd certainly look swell. Heck, you could even dress up as a general, everyday welder if the mood suited – just don't actually try welding anything in it, as great pain will likely follow.

MINECRAFT LIGHT-UP REDSTONE ORE

MANUFACTURER: **THINKGEEK** / PRICE: **$24.99**

THERE'S NO REAL practical application for this slick-looking *Minecraft* memorabilia, given that it possesses roughly enough wattage to light up the inside of a shoe. Nevertheless, you'll be hard pressed to find another paperweight close to rivalling the sickening hipster appeal of this luscious block of red light.





ASSASSIN'S CREED III TOMAHAWK

MANUFACTURER: **UBISOFT** / PRICE: **£34.99**

THE WEAPON OF choice for any discerning Native Americans enacting bloody vengeance on 18th Century colonial America, *Assassin's Creed III*'s Tomahawk is an effective a bit of kit for scalping Templars. Of course, you won't be doing much scalping with this convention-approved PU latex blade, but for anyone dull enough to actually attend cosplay events you'll find this immaculately replicated piece of weaponry a perfect accessory for your assassin's ensemble. Comes with a feather and everything.

You're only seconds away from your favourite magazine

GreatDigitalMags.com

Over **900** magazines and bookazines, for every device, from **one** great website





Read on all popular devices including Apple & Android



1 Visit the website GreatDigitalMags.com



2 Filter titles by your favourite store

iTunes
Google play
amazon
zinio™
MAGZTER DIGITAL MAGAZINE STORE
nook by Barnes & Noble

3 Choose a digital magazine or book

4 Purchase in-store, download & enjoy!



Save up to 40% off regular print prices

MOVIE TEES & HOODIES

NERDOH.COM ALWAYS FREE UK P&P



CHILLOUT GAMES
we value your games
www.chilloutgames.co.uk/SellGames.aspx



We Pay:



£15.12

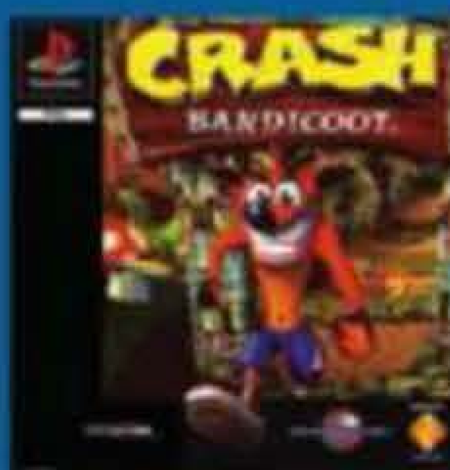


£25.05



£17.04

-RAPID PAYMENT
-GREAT PRICES
-TRUSTWORTHY



£8.82



£6.43



£15.11



Prices valid as at 18th March 2013. Prices subject to change on a daily basis. Chillout Games and retro-games.co.uk are trading names of Chillout Games Ltd. Prices are for shop credit - 12% more than PayPal. T&Cs at www.chilloutgames.co.uk.

games™ MMO WORLDS

The essential guide to the online gaming universe



FEATURE

BOMBERMINE

The fan-made MMO incarnation of Hudson's multiplayer classic

INTERVIEW

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

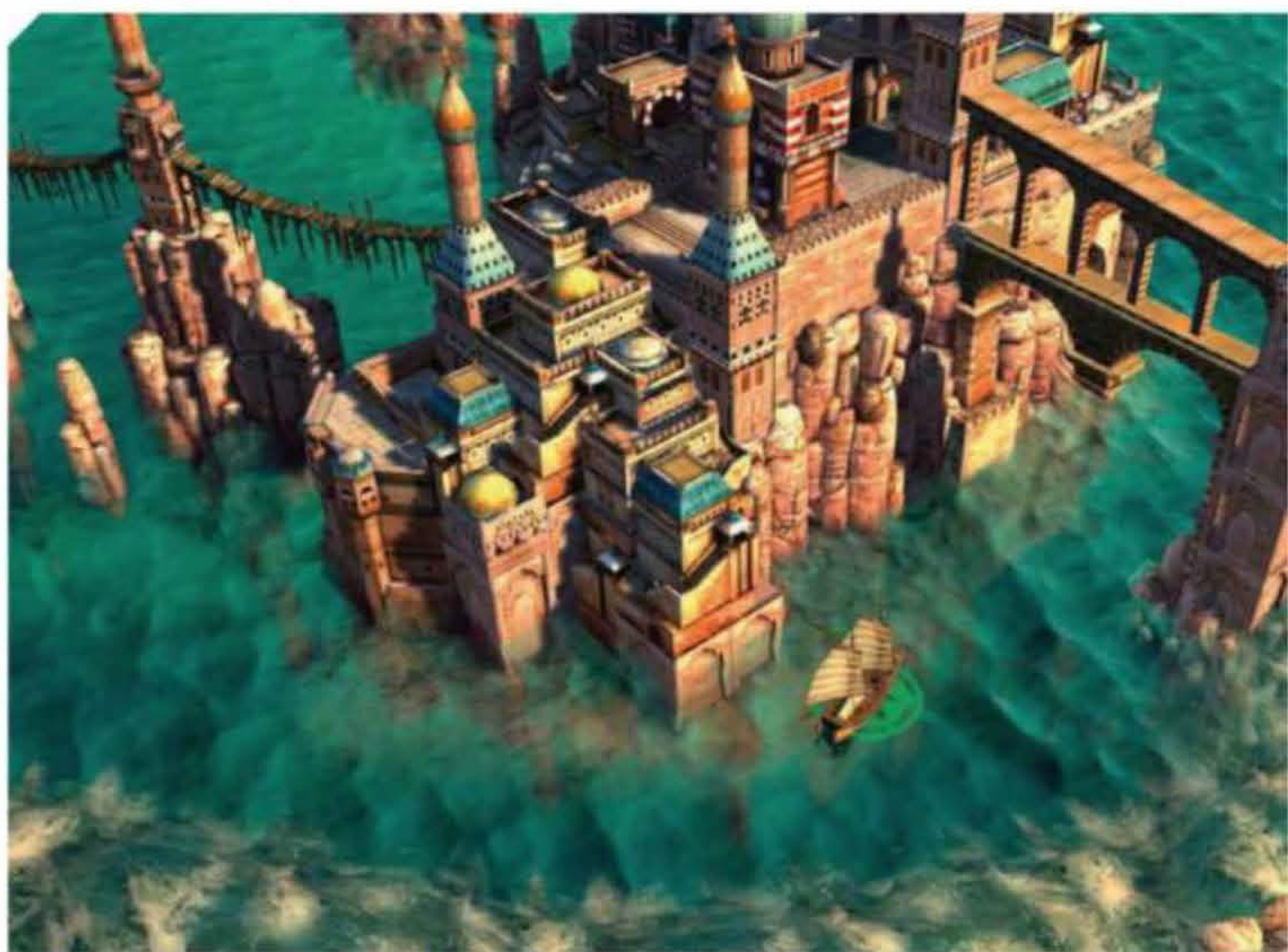
Blizzard discusses the ubiquitous MMO's latest update

KARTUGA

GAMES™ TAKES TO THE SEAS FOR TICKING BOMB GAMES' STRATEGIC PIRATEY MMO

Kartuga

TICKING BOMB GAMES BROADSIDES BROWSERS WITH PIRATEY GEM OF AN MMOG



We expected a game a little like *Sid Meier's Pirates* and what we got, at first, was an off-piste *Micro Machines* in the 18th Century. The noob area of *Kartuga* buzzes with activity, with half the ships suffering no more from an experimental left-click of our broadside than being rocked precariously. The other half that aren't players in this closed beta – the merchants and the marginally tougher coastguards – suck up a couple of clicks' worth more from our cannons and are sunk, yielding tiny crates of loot. That's combat in *Kartuga*: an elegant and relatively skilled matter of using WASD to navigate your ship, while timing a burst from your cannons to catch your opponent with the full breadth of your broadside. If that was it, we'd have got bored very quickly.

"We know that the pirate setting is a very appealing one," says Florian Supa, *Kartuga*'s product manager at InnoGames. "On the other hand, we think that a lot of movies and games already out there are only covering a small part of the setting. We wanted to show that there is more to pirates than the generalisation of the Caribbean. In *Kartuga*, you won't find parrots or peg legs; it is more of a steampunk atmosphere."

This is an MMOG with a simplified approach – casual by today's standards – though it incorporates some of the sophisticated components of a classic MMORPG system and buries them out of sight until you go looking for them. These are the treasures we sought out. Some players have bemoaned the lack of

INFORMATION

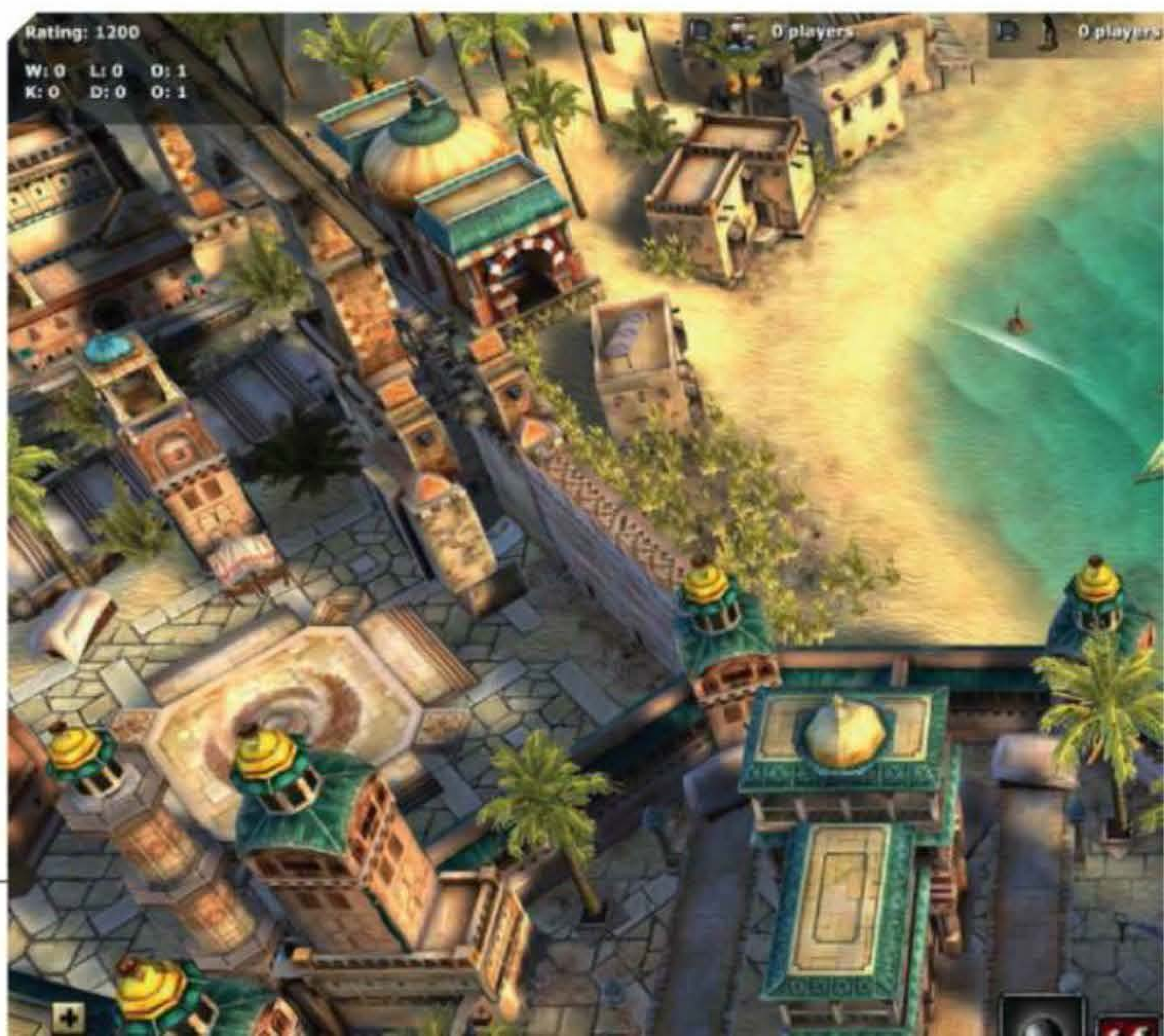
FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: InnoGames
DEVELOPER: Ticking Bomb Games
ORIGIN: Germany

Below right: Ship-on-ship combat requires plenty of skill if you want to make it out of a skirmish unscathed. You need to time your cannon fire for maximum impact.





Above: The Protector is a robust battleship, but moves at a ponderous speed.



PRIVATEERING AROUND

When the single-player mode wears thin, *Kartuga* has two PvP modes you can drop into at any time. Click on either the 'Domination' or 'Destruction' tabs at the top of the screen and you'll be entered into a queue, eventually being warped away to the appropriate match. Domination involves capturing towers as a part of a team, while in Destruction you have to make a British Bulldogs-style run to the middle of the map – while under fire from the enemy, of course. Temporary buff items drop in strategic places, so even though there's no matchmaking system at the moment (soon to be rectified, we hope), if you catch a weakened high-level ship while you're powered-up, you may still be able to sink it.



The Unity 3D engine is the reason why Ticking Bomb Games can pack an attractive-looking game into a simple browser window, with reasonable loading times and decent frame rates.

customisation when you're creating a new ship in *Kartuga*, but we didn't think adding any frills to them was necessary because ship upgrades are earned as rewards. You have a choice of three basic classes: a DPS-style Destroyer with damage buffs; a Protector that takes the beats and moves slowly; and the Engineer, which isn't particularly tough or powerful, but can buff, heal and debuff other ships at will. All three classes can add specialisations once they're suitably levelled; the Protector can become a Suppressor or a Wrangler, for example, supporting team-mates or dishing out devastating critical hits to enemies respectively.



Dig a little bit around *Kartuga*'s various interfaces and you'll discover some more depth. The inventory starts to remind us of a traditional RPG, with slots for different cannon types, consumables and crew members, all of which contribute a nominal amount to your attack, speed, damage, regeneration (that's the ship's carpenter, in case you were wondering how a ship regenerates) and other classic MMORPG stats. Extra slots can be unlocked and better items can be equipped at higher levels, but the currency that drives all this is, of course, gold – the gold that you loot from sinking AI ships, the rewards for completing quests, and a pirate's treasure trove of the yellow shiny stuff for finishing a game in one of the two PvP modes, Domination and Destruction. This is where you'll be spending most of your time.

"Since the title focuses mainly on PvP there doesn't have to necessarily be an endgame," says Supa. "We will, of course, build more maps over time, and when players have had enough with exploring these, they can really focus on PvP missions and honing the craft of naval combat.

"Another benefit of doing an online title is that there are unlimited possibilities in the future as far as development goes. We can deploy frequent updates and continue expanding the world. In closed beta, there are five PvE maps and four PvP maps, each 36 square kilometres. We will only keep growing from there with no specific end point."

> "It incorporates some sophisticaed components of a classic MMORPG system and buries them out of sight… these are the treasures we sought out"



You can spend gold on your upgrades and in a piratey shop, in which you can buy different ammunition types, consumables and more, even when you're far from the nearest port. Naturally, this prompts a lot of pirating, whether you're clicking through the mundane story chain and popping off a handful of generic kill quests, or simply grinding away at the dozens of AI ship mobs sailing in circles around their designated areas. Because ship-on-ship combat is skill-based, this is more engaging than it sounds; you can squeeze through a battle with a powerful AI opponent almost completely unscathed if your form is right, unlike a classic MMORPG where you can almost predict the outcome of a battle before it's even started.

But the big rewards in terms of gameplay and gold are, as expected, in fighting alongside and against other human players in large naval PvP contests. It wants for a matchmaking system at the moment, as well as a couple more reasons to muck in as a part of a larger fleet, but ultimately this is a very pretty, casual, browser-based MMOG designed for players to easily drop in and out of – and that it does really well. 

MMO UPDATES

THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WORLD OF ONLINE GAMING

TROUBLE DOWN IN THE CITY OF SIM



EA has apologised for the delays and problems *SimCity* players have experienced at the launch of its new city-building title. The servers have been doubled to clear the queues, and additional engineers have been drafted in to crush bugs.

BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS FOR EVERQUEST



One of the oldest MMORPGs still alive, SOE's *EverQuest* celebrated turning 14 years old on 16 March. To mark the occasion, players are experiencing two months' worth of experience gain boosts, rare drop increases and anniversary quests. What, no cake?

THE HUTT CLAN INVADE OLD REPUBLIC



As any discerning *Star Wars* fan would know, Makeb is the famous abode of the Hutt Cartel in the galaxy far, far away and it's now on its way to *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. It comes with the release of the new expansion, *Rise Of The Hutt Cartel*, which gives players a showdown with the Hutts on their own doorstep.

ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE PACKS A PUNCH



Bethesda has recently gone into further detail in regard to the combat mechanics for *The Elder Scrolls Online* on the official blog site. Fans were concerned with 'soft-locking', selecting a target to attack, and how this would affect targets in crowds. You can read more at **www.elderscrollsonline.com**.

A FANTASTIC NEW MMO THAT'S AS MUCH A LEGAL MINEFIELD AS IT IS A DIGITAL ONE

Bombermine

If we've learned one thing about the *Bomberman* franchise in the past 30 years, it's that it makes for a pretty dull experience when played on your own. While multiplayer shenanigans were introduced to the series relatively early, it wasn't until the five-player multiplayer mode appeared on the PC Engine in 1992 that the franchise really took off and gained popularity with gamers. Since then, creator Hudson Soft has typically taken a 'bigger is better' approach, culminating in the rather excellent *Saturn Bomberman* in 1996 that catered for up to ten players at the same time. Ten appeared to be the cut-off point for the franchise, however, and while the series has since branched into online gaming, eight players has always been the maximum number of players that any *Bomberman* game has ever catered for online.

It's rather amazing, then, that another developer has come along and not only beaten Konami (who now owns the IP) at its own game – and with a clone of its own game, we might add – but widely exceeded it, delivering an online experience that caters for a staggering 1,000 players. That's right, 1,000 players – turning the classic *Bomberman* gameplay into one of the most dangerously addictive online games we have experienced since *DayZ* first reared its ugly head.

Of course, it should be pointed out that *Bombermine* has nothing to do with Konami's *Bomberman* licence, being instead an unofficial clone. This worries us somewhat, because it means that some of the best fun we've had online for some time could be pulled at the shortest of notices. In fact, we'd go so far as to recommend you quickly stop reading now so you can experience *Bombermine* in some capacity, just in case this does happen.

This would be a bit of a shame, for while *Bombermine* is currently still in beta, it's already proving to be an insane amount of fun, even if it does suffer from a fair few technical hiccups. By far the biggest issue with *Bombermine* is that the browser-based game can sometimes suffer from disconnects, meaning you can drop out of a game with very little warning. Simply reloading your browser is all it takes to get back into the on-screen action, but you'll find your stats immediately wiped (although this in itself isn't that much of an issue as the game is incredible tough).

Another aspect to take into consideration is the sheer brutality that we've encountered while playing. It's possible for players to team up in large squads and ruthlessly hunt down other players. While this is a lot of fun for those doing the stalking, it causes great frustration if you're on the receiving end because your initial resources are so poor. You start off with a simple bomb, but the sheer size of the map means that it can take a fair time before you can amass a decent range of power-ups. The pace is further slowed by the different types of blocks that withstand various amounts of damage before they're eventually destroyed.

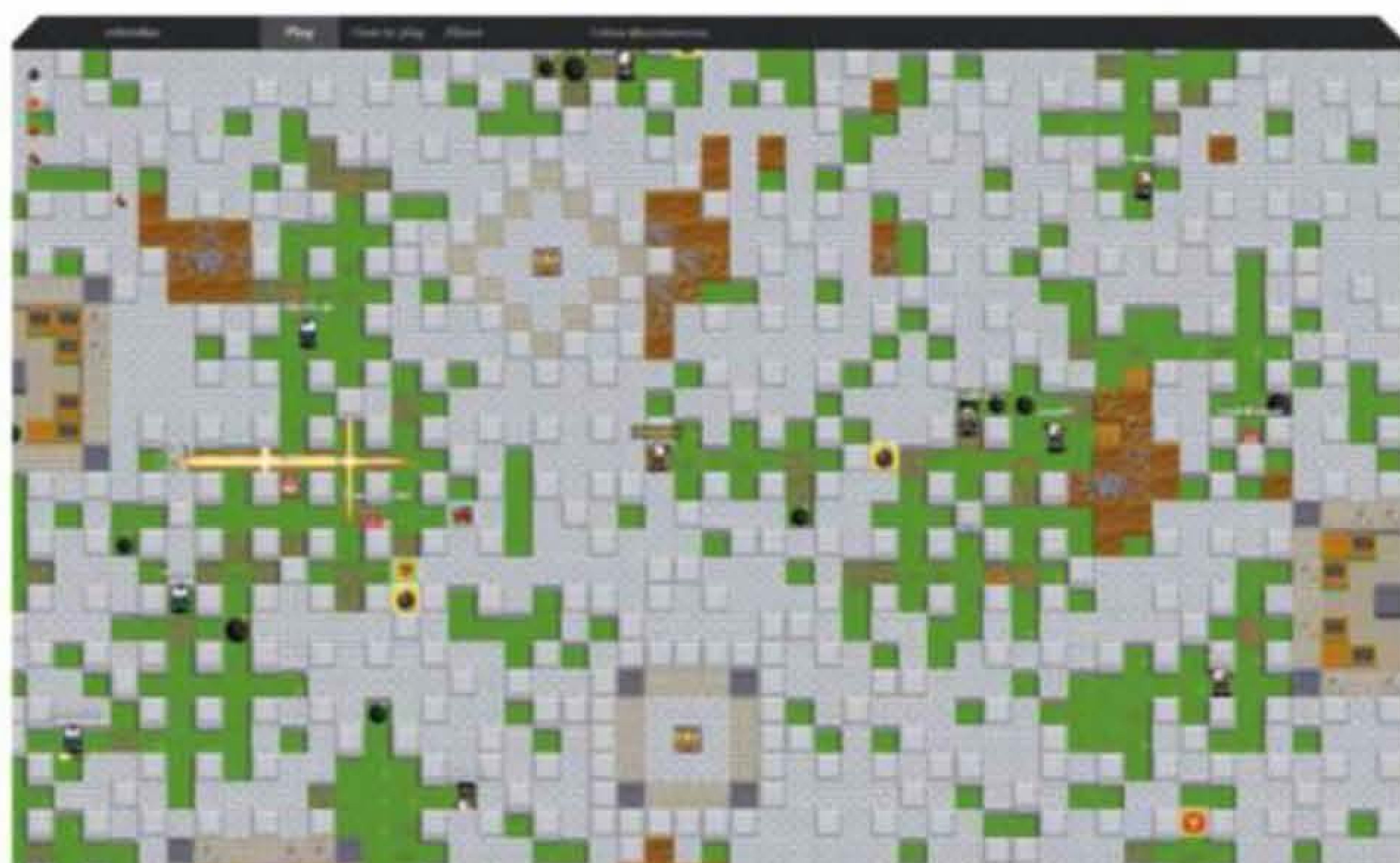
This in itself would be fine, but with rounds lasting for only 20 minutes you quickly realise that every second counts and you'll soon start looking around for

INFORMATION

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **Cyberspace**
DEVELOPER: **In-house**
ORIGIN: **Moscow**



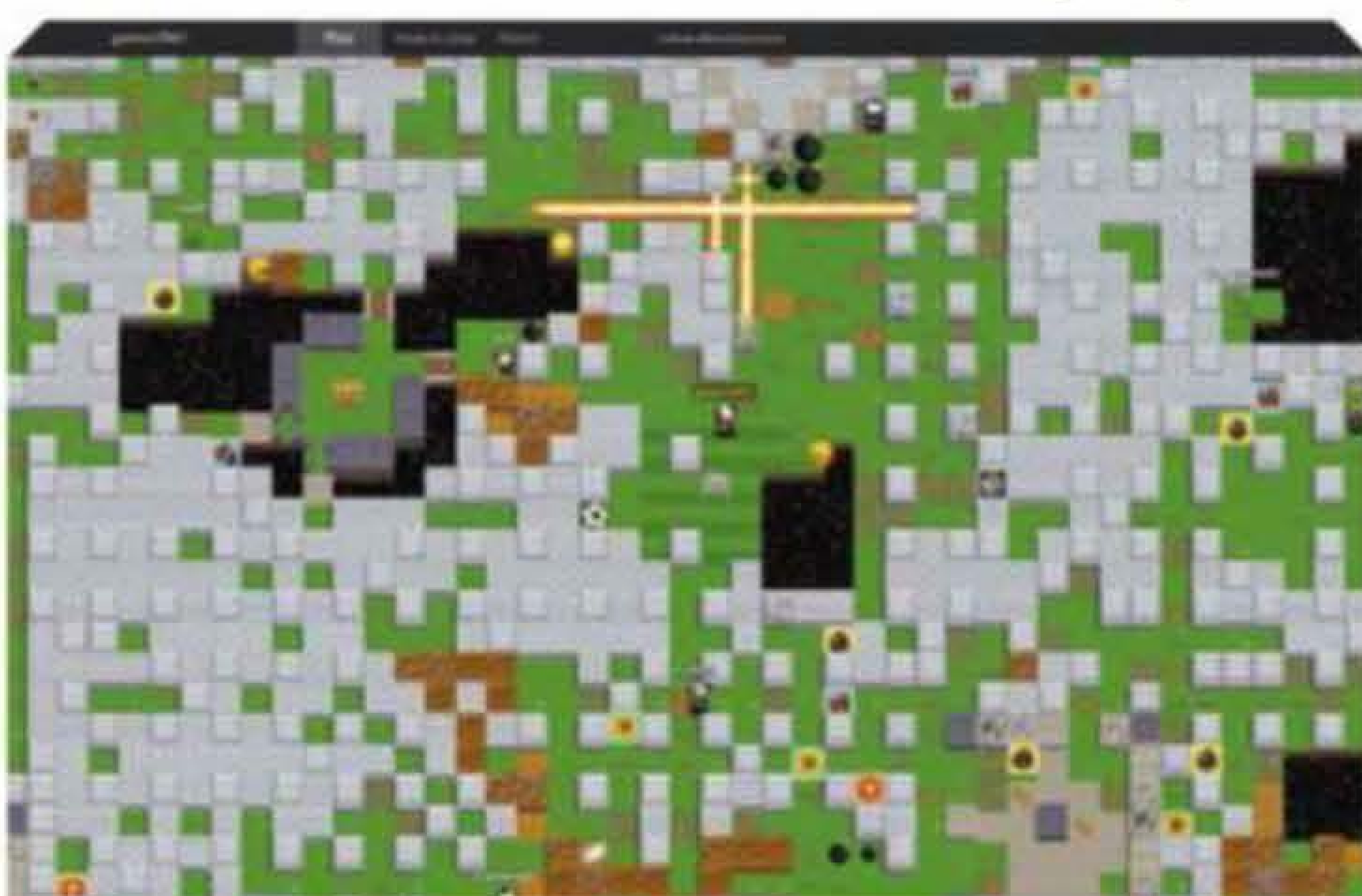




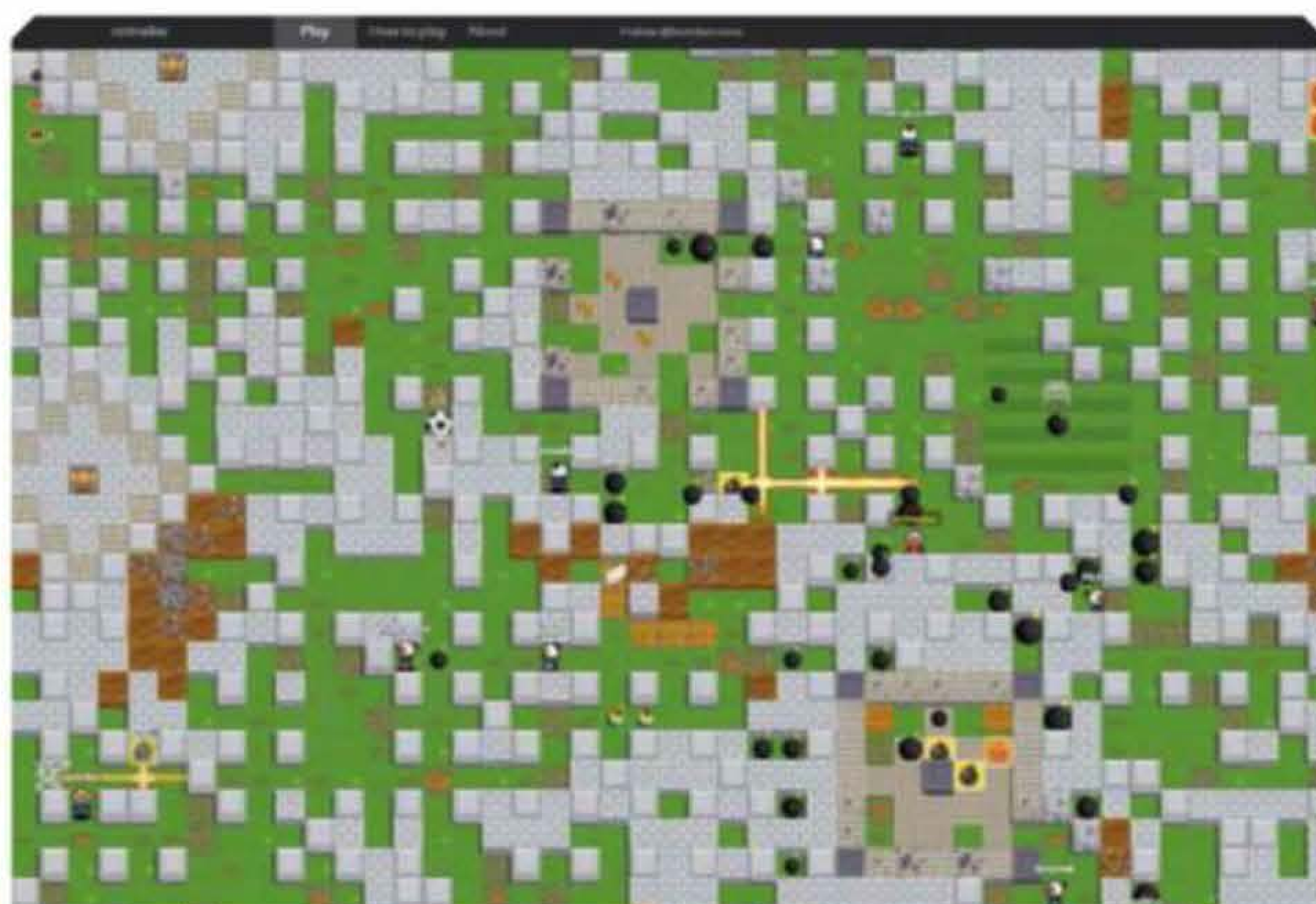


What can we say? *Bombermine* is really tough, and it gets even harder when everyone is hunting you down like a rabid dog.

"It's possible for players to team up in large squads and ruthlessly hunt down other players"



A chat box does exist in *Bombermine*, but it was getting filled with so many naughty expletives we thought it was easier to simple cut it out.



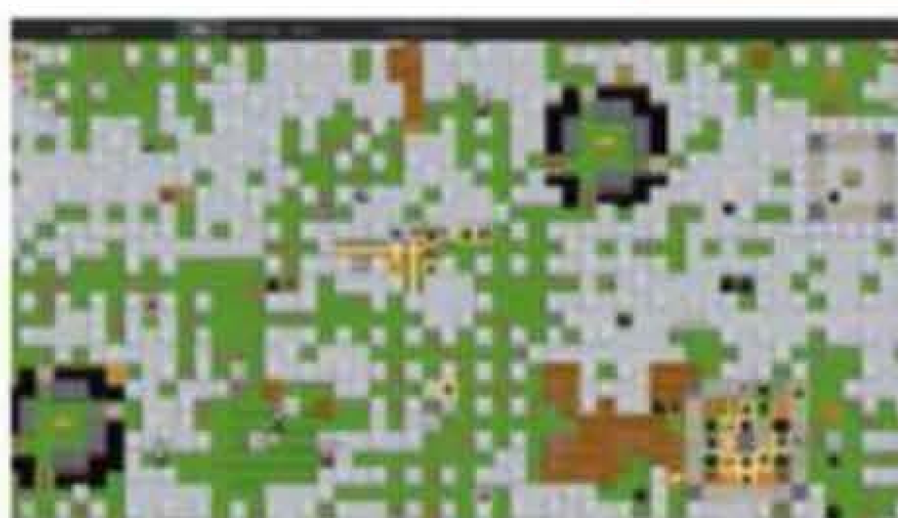
Certain parts of the game have unique areas that can house important treasure. They're often surrounded by tougher blocks, though, so don't expect to just walk in.

weakened structures that are easier to attack. The power-ups help, of course, and the developer has added all sorts of options, ranging from traditional *Bomberman* power-ups – like additional bombs and flame extensions – to precious shields that allow you to withstand a single hit and a deadly blue bomb that takes out ten cells in one blast. Random status effects are also rife and are typically found in chests; once activated they stay with the player for a set amount of time, affecting anyone else they walk into. Status effects range from invisibility to flipping the screen and reversing your controls. There's even a tribute to the annoying Nyan Cat, which considerably boosts your speed and gives you more powerful bombs, but no actual control over them.

The mix of traditional and inventive power-ups strikes a nice balance, giving the player plenty of scope as they go about amassing as high a score as possible in the 20-minute time frame. While points are scored for blowing up other players, you can earn more by picking up precious minerals, knocking footballs into nearby goal posts and performing other tasks. It makes a frantic game even more hectic, with players doggedly chasing loot drops.

While *Bombermine* is still in its early stages, it's already shaping up nicely, thanks to its receptive developers (you can follow them on Twitter @Bombermine) and the massive potential it offers. The only real downsides so far is the occasionally unstable servers, the fact that it's a massive time-waster and that you'll sometimes respawn in an instant-death situation. It's also unclear what approach Konami will eventually take and what future that might spell for *Bombermine*. What we do know, however, is that it's currently one of the best online experiences you can currently have, and it won't cost you a single penny.

LAWSUITS R US



FROM WHAT WE'VE currently played of *Bombermine* it's safe to say that it's something of a legal minefield for the developers. While *Bomberman* is the most obvious licence that is being taken at liberty, there are all sorts of other copyright infringements going on; there's a *Pac-Man* that slowly eats up map, a Slowpoke from *Pokémon* – which naturally slows you down – and we've also discovered *South Park*'s Kenny. Then there's Nyan Cat, spreading his sickly cheerfulness to anyone stupid enough to wonder into his path. Our advice? Play it while you still can.

The most pertinent questions facing MMO developers today



Greg Street

Lead systems designer, Blizzard Entertainment

Blizzard has just launched the massively ambitious 5.2 patch for World Of Warcraft, introducing a new raid, a new zone to explore, new loot to roll on and then some. We talk to Greg 'Ghostcrawler' Street to find out more

It's been about six months since *Mists Of Pandaria* launched; how do you feel players have responded to the world now they've had some time to spend in it?

We feel like the reaction has been great overall. *Pandaria* has a really strong sense of place that I think was lacking a little bit in *Cataclysm*. *Cataclysm* was really spread out along loads of different zones. *Pandaria* has a feel and a spirit – and a look that's really strong – that seems to resonate with players.

What was the thought behind the inclusion of the Thunderforged items? Are they a response to the decline in 25-player raiding?

"We wanted [raiding] to feel exciting to players even, say, three months from now, when they have the first two bosses on farm and they can't get the last bosses. Traditionally, nobody wants the loot on the first couple of bosses, everything gets sharded. So we thought, 'What if there's a small chance of having an even better version of the item pop out, so people would still be excited in seeing the loot that came out from Jin'rokh even months from now?' That was the original idea behind Thunderforge."

Do you think 25-player raids are becoming redundant?

"We really like 25-player raiding. We think, ultimately, it offers a better experience. It feels more epic. So we said, 'Hey, what if we also have [the Thunderforged items] drop more frequently in 25s, just so those 25 players feel like we haven't forgotten about them? That they're still important, and that we still try and give them a little bit of extra reward for all the logistical hurdles they have to face?'"

While we've seen the introduction of Thunderforge weapons in 5.2, we've also seen the removal of item upgradeability. Does Blizzard view the feature as a failed experiment or as something you are likely to tweak and put back into the game?

"I think there's a good chance we will still bring it back; it makes more sense in the odd-numbered patches where players have run out of gear… I think the thing we learned [was] that it was very expensive to upgrade an item. We wanted it to be a big deal and kind of precious, but there was a lot of concern from players – understandably so – about making mistakes. The idea we are talking about now is to make it a lot cheaper, so you can realistically upgrade everything. And then when you get a new item you're still excited to have the new item, rather than sad that you have to spend more Valor."

What do you hope players take away from patch 5.2?

"I really want players to get the message that this is a commitment for Blizzard and the *World Of Warcraft* team, and this is the type of content players can expect year after year. Sometimes, there's the risk that players say, 'Gosh, this game's been going on for nine years; certainly it's winding down, or it's something Blizzard is putting out to pasture and isn't really going to support much any more.' But this huge patch is our example of no, *World Of Warcraft* is alive and well, and as long as we keep having so many players, we will keep making the best content we can possibly make."

> "This is the type of content players can expect year after year"





Introduced in the 5.2 patch, the Isle of Giants is home to a bunch of huge dinosaurs.

games™

Imagine Publishing Ltd
Richmond House, 33 Richmond Hill,
Bournemouth, Dorset, BH2 6EZ
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586200
Web: www.imagine-publishing.co.uk
www.gamestm.co.uk
www.greatdigitalmags.com

Magazine team

Editor In Chief Nick Roberts
nick.roberts@imagine-publishing.co.uk
☎ 01202 586219
Staff Writers David Scarborough, Josh West
Senior Art Editor Greg Whitaker
Assistant Designer Perry Wardell-Wicks
Sub Editor Victor Janhagen
Photographer James Sheppard
Head of Publishing Aaron Asadi
Head of Design Ross Andrews

Contributors
Luke Albigés, Adam Barnes, Ben Biggs, Dan Collins, David Crookes, Jon Denton, Matt Edwards, Andrew Fisher, Dan Griliopoulos, Grant Howitt, Stuart Hunt, Darran Jones, Phil King, Ryan King, David Lynch, Damien McFerran, Emily Morganti, Graham Nicholson, Samuel Roberts, Chris Schilling

Cover Image

© 2013 Sony Computer Entertainment Europe. All rights reserved.

Advertising
Digital or printed media packs are available on request.

Head of Sales Hang Deretz
☎ 01202 586442
hang.deretz@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Advertising Manager Simon Catley
☎ 01202 586437
simon.catley@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Account Manager Anthony Godsell
☎ 01202 586420
anthony.godsell@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Sales Executive Richard Rust
☎ 01202 586436
richard.rust@imagine-publishing.co.uk

International
games™ is available for licensing. Contact the International department to discuss partnership opportunities.

Head of International Licensing Cathy Blackman
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586401
licensing@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Subscriptions
For subscription enquiries email:
gamestm@servicehelpline.co.uk

☎ UK 0844 848 8429

☎ Overseas +44 1795 592 864
13 issue subscription UK – £52.00
13 issue subscription Europe – £70.00
13 issue subscription ROW – £80.00

Circulation
Head of Circulation Darren Pearce
☎ 01202 586200

Production
Production Director Jane Hawkins
☎ 01202 586200

Founders
Group Managing Director Damian Butt
Group Finance & Commercial Director Steven Boyd
Group Creative Director Mark Kendrick

Printing & Distribution
Printed by Wyndeham Heron Ltd, Bentalls Complex, Colchester Road, Heybridge, Maldon, Essex, CM9 4NW
☎ 01621 877 777

Distributed in the UK and Eire by Seymour Distribution, 2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT
☎ 020 7429 4000

Distributed in Australia by Gordon & Gotch, Equinox Centre, 18 Rodborough Road, Frenchs Forest, NSW 2086
☎ +61 2 9972 8800

Distributed in the Rest of the World by Marketforce, Blue Fin Building, 110 Southwark Street, London, SE1 0SU
☎ 020 3148 8105

Disclaimer
The publisher cannot accept responsibility for any unsolicited material lost or damaged in the post. All text and layout is the copyright of Imagine Publishing Ltd. Nothing in this magazine may be reproduced in whole or part without the written permission of the publisher. All copyrights are recognised and used specifically for the purpose of criticism and review. Although the magazine has endeavoured to ensure all information is correct at time of print, prices and availability may change. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

© Imagine Publishing Ltd 2013

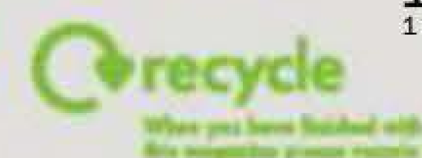
ISSN 1478-5889







12,608
1 Jan - 31 Dec 2012



ONLY £17.49!

FERAL LEGENDS





GRID™

OUT NOW

AVAILABLE BOXED AND VIA DOWNLOAD

WWW.FERALINTERACTIVE.COM



© 2007–2013 The Codemasters Software Company Limited ("Codemasters"). Originally developed and published by Codemasters. All rights reserved. "Codemasters"® is a registered trademark owned by Codemasters. "GRID"™ and the Codemasters logo are trademarks of Codemasters. Developed for and published on the Mac by Feral Interactive Ltd. Mac and the Mac logo are trademarks of Apple Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. Feral and the Feral logo are trademarks of Feral Interactive Ltd. This game is NOT licensed by or associated with the FIA or any related company. All other copyrights or trademarks are the property of their respective owners and are being used under license. All rights reserved.



Your wrap
is whack bra !



School is back
in session 9 May

AN 18 MONTH ONLINE PROGRAM, LEARNING CHARACTER ART OR CHARACTER RIGGING/TECHNICAL ART FROM TOP INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

GAME CHARACTER
ACADEMY

REGISTER NOW FOR THE
JULY 2013 TERM





www.gc-academy.net

"DARK looks to make the stealth genre cool again"
- Gamercast

"One of the most surprising titles at Gamescom 2012"
- Hooked Gamers

DARK



Pre-order now from
GAME
IT'S NEVER JUST A GAME









Out 14th June for Xbox 360



www.getintothedark.com PC DVD ROM XBOX 360 kalypso

Dark Copyright © 2013 Kalypso Media Group. All rights reserved. Developed by Realmforge Studios. Published by Kalypso Media UK Ltd. All other logos, copyrights and trademarks are property of their respective owners. Kinect, Xbox, Xbox 360, Xbox LIVE, and the Xbox logos are trademarks of the Microsoft group of companies and are used under license from Microsoft.